

DAVID EWERT

# Searching the Scriptures

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THE  
SCRIPTURES***

By

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To the past editors of the *Menmonitische Rundschau*  
that I have known: Henry F. Klassen, Eric Ratzlaff,  
Abe Schellenberg, and to Lorina Marsch  
who persuaded me to become a contributor to the *Rundschau*.

## INTRODUCTION

It was in the summer of 1992, while attending the Mennonite Brethren Conference in Montreal, that the editor of the *Menmonitische Rundschau*, Lorina Marsch, asked whether I would consider writing for this hundred-year old denominational publication. At first I hesitated, thinking that perhaps this paper, after serving several generations of German-speaking immigrants from Europe, should be given honorable burial. I should have known better, for every time I visited my mother in the Tabor Home (she lived until she was 100), I noticed how eagerly she waited for the next issue of the *Rundschau* to arrive. Finally I decided I would try to make my contribution.

The *Rundschau* played a decisive role in our family's history, although that had nothing to do with my decision to begin to write for this paper. We arrived in Canada in the winter of 1926, and the following year my father worked for a farmer in southern Saskatchewan. He didn't know there was such a German paper called the *Rundschau*, but one day the editor of this publication came by to solicit subscribers. The editor, Mr. Neufeld, promised to send my parents a copy when he got back to Winnipeg. In due time it arrived, and in it was an invitation from Mennonite settlers in northern Ontario, encouraging poor immigrants to come to Reesor (near Kapuskasing) and work in the lumber industry. That became the occasion for our move into a god-forsaken place deep in the forest, where for two years my father felled trees for the paper company, and we endured almost total isolation from the rest of the world. Fortunately our parents realized in time that Reesor was not a place to bring up a family, and we migrated to western Canada. All through my growing-up years the *Rundschau* was a regular guest in our home. Although we as children couldn't be bothered reading this German publication, it provided much spiritual nourishment and valuable information for my parents.

Since 1992, then, I have contributed regularly to every issue of the *Rundschau*. I was asked to address questions on biblical interpretation which readers in different countries might raise.

German-speaking readers in Paraguay, Brazil, Germany, Russia, and of course Canada, have addressed numerous questions to the *Rundschau* over the years, and I have tried to respond to these questions. Also, I have repeatedly asked my own questions and answered them for the benefit of the readers. The responses of the readers encouraged me to render some of the questions and answers that have appeared in the *Rundschau* over the last eight years into English, for the benefit of those who do not read German. Perhaps Bible readers will find these articles useful for their daily study of the Scriptures.

In order to keep this volume within reasonable limits, I have omitted the questions about Old Testament texts. Also, many questions that came to me were of a general biblical nature, unrelated to specific Scripture passages. These too have been omitted. All the questions asked in this volume focused on New Testament passages, and the answers given here follow the canonical order of the books of the New Testament, rather than the order in which they were published in the *Rundschau*.

The translation of the articles from German into English has been done with some freedom, since "literal" translations do not make for good reading. If readers detect some Germanisms here and there, I ask for their indulgence. Occasionally I have gone beyond translation to make minor revisions in the interest of greater clarity.

I want to thank Dr. Abe Dueck of the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies and a former colleague of mine, for seeing these pages through the press.

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# NEW TESTAMENT TEXTS STUDIED IN THIS VOLUME

Matthew	Luke	2 Corinthians
1:1-18	12:50	1:22
2:6	14:26	4:7
6:13	16:9	Ephesians
10:5,6	16:19-31	2:8,9
11:12	22:38	Philippians
13:30		1:29
13:44-46	John	2:7
15:26	3:5	1 Timothy
16:18	13:15	2:4
22:14	14:2	2 Timothy
25:31-46	18:31	3:16
	19:19	1 Peter
Mark		3:21
1:9-11	Acts	4:1
1:12,13	1:5	2 Peter
2:1-12	1:6-11	3:12
2:21,22	2:1ff.	1 John
3:13-19	8:1ff.	2:20,27
4:12	17:30	5:6
8:31	20:35	Revelation
9:1		3:15
11:12-14	Romans	6:1-8
13:14	8:27	6:9-11
14:36	11:26	12:1ff.
15:34		13:1ff.
	1 Corinthians	14:1ff.
Luke	5:5	20:6
1:34	11:1-16	21:3,24-26
2:14	12:14	22:2
7:28	15:7	22:18,19
7:31-35	15:1ff.	22:7,20
11:14-23	15:29	





**1. *Why would a biblical writer begin his book with a lengthy genealogy, as we see this, for example, in Matthew 1:1-18?***

Perhaps it would be asking too much of modern readers to get interested in a book that begins with a family tree a page long, as we find this in Matthew's Gospel. It should be remembered, however, that Matthew, who wrote more than 1900 years ago, had a Jewish audience in mind. At that time, Jewish people had a keen interest in genealogies. Josephus, the Jewish historian, who lived about the time of Christ, also begins the story of his life with a genealogy.

That genealogies were highly prized in Judaism, can be illustrated in a variety of ways. For example, some Jews, living in the Diaspora, had the names of their children entered in records kept in Jerusalem. Herod the Great, under whose rule Jesus was born, had his family tree destroyed so that no one could prove that he had Edomite blood in his veins. Jewish priests had to prove from their genealogies that they were descendants of Aaron. Clearly, genealogies were very important for Jewish readers. And for Jewish Christians, who had put their faith in Jesus as Messiah, it would be doubly important for Matthew to begin his Gospel with a genealogy of Jesus.

Matthew's genealogy of our Lord has a rather unique structure. It is divided into three groups with fourteen names of Jesus' forebears in each division. The first division ends with David, the second with the Babylonian captivity, and the third with the birth of Jesus. If one compares Matthew's genealogy with 1 Chronicles 1-3, one discovers that the Evangelist omitted some names, and in the third group he repeats a name, in order to preserve the symmetry of three groups of fourteen names.

For Christian readers there are significant theological truths hidden away in this seemingly barren list of names, and so we should not skip lightly over the genealogy of our Lord. First, this genealogy emphasizes that Jesus, by being born, entered into the human family; he became a link in the long chain of humanity. It is Matthew's way of saying what John says in other words: "The

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word became flesh and lived among us" (Jn. 1:14). Although Christ himself was without sin, he became a member of our sinful, fallen human race. Only by becoming truly human, with a genealogy like that of his contemporaries, could he bring us back to God.

Second, Matthew wanted to show that Jesus was the son of David. In fact he begins his genealogy with "an account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Mt. 1:1). In the distant past God had promised David, Israel's king, who had been forbidden to build a house for God, that he would build him a house, and that he would "establish his kingdom forever" (2 Sam. 7:13). This promise was fulfilled through the birth of the greater son of David, Jesus the Christ. Jesus, of course, did not come to re-establish a Jewish nation state, but the kingdom of God--a kingdom not of this world, an eternal kingdom. Old Testament promises are often couched in political language, which is transmuted by the New Testament writers and used in a non-political, spiritual sense.

Third, the genealogy of Jesus also confirms what our Lord told the Samaritan woman, "salvation is from the Jews" (Jn. 4:22). Some copyists of this passage found this saying of Jesus hard to write, because the Jewish people by and large rejected Jesus as Messiah. One of them changed the word "Jews" to "a Jew", namely, Jesus; another wrote, "salvation is from Judaea". Such deliberate changes in the text betray an anti-Semitic attitude. No Christian believer can question the Jewishness of Jesus. Salvation is "from" the Jews, but not just "for" the Jews; it is for all humanity. When God chose Abraham (and Matthew does mention the Father of all believers in 1:1), he wanted him to be a blessing to the nations. That hope was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus.

Fourth, Matthew's genealogy gives the woman a new and exalted place. Jesus was born of a woman ("Mary, of whom Jesus was born," Mt. 1:16). What must have struck Jewish readers as incredibly strange is that Matthew includes several women's names in a very patriarchal genealogy. Even stranger is the fact, that the four women mentioned in the genealogy (other than Mary) are women with a bad reputation. The Evangelist does not hesitate to

name the Canaanite women, Rahab and Tamar, the Moabitess, Ruth, and Bathsheba, the wife of the Hittite, Uria. All of them were sinners from the Gentiles. In these names we can hear the good news of the gospel, "I have come to call sinners to repentance." Gentile Christians find the presence of Gentile women in Jesus' genealogy particularly gratifying, for that means that they too are included in God's saving plans. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son" (Jn. 3:16).

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### ***2. Why does Matthew (2:6) quote Micah 5:2 in answer to the question where Messiah was to be born, different from what the prophet said?***

Before we try to answer this question, let us see first what the prophet said, and then compare his words with those quoted by Matthew. Micah has: "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel." Matthew says: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."

The New Testament writers, inspired by the Spirit of God, wrote their books in Hellenistic Greek. The Old Testament, the Bible of our Lord and of the apostles, had been written in Hebrew. Any attempt to render the Hebrew into Greek would call for changes in word order and sentence structure, for Greek and Hebrew belong to two different families of languages. A word for word translation is impossible and would make no sense at all.

Moreover, long before Jesus was born, Alexandrian Jews had translated the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek, since Jews living in a Hellenistic city such as Alexandria spoke Greek. This translation is called the Septuagint (the word means "seventy," and is based on the tradition that seventy translators participated in this translation project). This Greek version frequently departs from the Hebrew wording. The New Testament writers, however, frequently quote this version, which often treats the Hebrew wording with considerable freedom.

Occasionally, also, New Testament writers quote Old Testament texts in a form that is neither exactly like the Hebrew Old Testament or the Greek Septuagint version. At times they take the wording of the Old Testament passage and adjust it to the new situation, brought about by the coming of Christ. And that is evidently the case with Micah 5:2 in Matthew's quotation.

But now let us take note of the differences. First, Matthew drops the old designation of Bethlehem, namely "Ephrathah."

Instead he has "in the land of Judah." Since there was another Bethlehem, located in Galilee (Josh. 19:15), Matthew wants it to be clear that Jesus was born in the old city of David, some six miles south of Jerusalem, in the province of Judea.

Second, Matthew says the exact opposite of what Micah said about the status of Bethlehem. Whereas the prophet underscores the insignificance of Bethlehem, the smallness of it, Matthew, writing many years after the coming of Christ, says that Bethlehem is by no means the least among the rulers of Judah. The birth of Messiah in this little town had given it significance beyond all measure. Matthew did not feel obligated to follow Micah's comment on Bethlehem's size; he speaks from the high point of God's revelation in Christ.

Third, Micah has, "from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule Israel." Matthew has, "from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." Since kings in the ancient world were looked upon as shepherds of their people, their rule can be rendered as "shepherding." The Good News Bible has, "he will guide my people Israel." Perhaps a quotation from 2 Samuel 5:2 would help to clarify this. Of David it is said, "it is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel." Here "shepherding" and "ruling" are used as parallels. Matthew recalls what was said about David long ago and carries this language over to the greater David, Jesus Christ.

Fourth, the last clause in Micah 5:2, "whose origin is from of old, from ancient days," is omitted by Matthew entirely. He simply takes the language of Micah 5:2 and applies it to a new situation, and under the guidance of the Spirit of God he does not feel constrained to quote Micah 5:2 precisely word for word. Matthew knew the wording of Micah 5:2, but from the vantage point of Christ's coming and his saving work on the cross and his exaltation to the right hand of God, he sees the fulfillment of the words of the prophet, and draws upon the language of Micah to describe the new situation. And the promise that Messiah will shepherd his people has profound implications for the daily life of the believer in every century.

In general it should be said, that the inspired writers of the

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books of the New Testament did not feel obligated to quote Old Testament passages exactly in the form they happen to have in our Hebrew Bibles. First, they usually quote from a Greek translation which was ready at hand and which does not always follow the Hebrew text very literally. Second, they often give only the gist of an OT passage to support what had happened in Christ. They did not quote the OT passages carelessly, and neither should we.

**3. How are we to understand the petition in the Lord's Prayer, "Lead us not into temptation?" Does God "tempt" people? (Matthew 6:13)**

Bible readers have often been puzzled by this petition because they understand the word "temptation" in the sense of temptation to do evil. That God does not tempt people to do evil is clearly stated in the Scriptures. The apostle James writes, "No one, when tempted, should say, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it" (1:13, 14). We can then, be sure, that when we are tempted to do evil, such a temptation does not come from God.

The word "temptation" can, however, have another meaning. It can also mean "to be put to the test." When it is stated, for example (at least in older English versions), that "God tempted Abraham", when he asked him to sacrifice his only son (Gen 22:1), it means that God was going to "test" Abraham's loyalty to God. He wanted to see whether Abraham would obey him under any circumstances. The outcome shows that God did not want the death of Isaac, but he wanted to put Abraham through the fiery trial, so that his faith might be refined like gold (I Pet 1:7).

This is also the way we should understand the "temptations" of Jesus. Jesus was moved by the Spirit to go into the wilderness, in order to be tempted by the Devil. The Devil, of course, wanted to trick Jesus into acts of disobedience, but that was not God's intent, when Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Spirit of God.

God wanted to test Jesus to see whether he was willing to go the path of obedience to the Father, as he carried out his work of redemption. It was after Jesus' baptism, after he had been endowed with the Spirit, and had been affirmed in his messianic calling by a voice from heaven, that he went into the wilderness. And after enduring Satan's attacks, he came forth, ready to be the suffering Servant of Isaiah 53.

If we, then, read Matthew 6:13, as a prayer, not to be put to the test, the petition is not quite so problematic. And yet, even that

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interpretation is not quite satisfactory, because we know that when God sends us testings, they are for our good. If I may quote James once more: "Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him" (Jam. 1:12). If trials are designed for our own good, is it then appropriate for us to be asking God constantly to spare us testings? Moreover, the petition not to lead us into temptation, in the Lord's Prayer, is followed up with the request, "but deliver us from evil." The "evil" could mean either the power of evil or "the evil one", i.e., Satan. If these two petitions are read as one, then it looks as if more is involved than just the trials and testings of life.

Perhaps we should bring in a Pauline passage at this point. The apostle assures the Corinthians that "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it" (I Cor. 10:13). We know that our faith needs to be tested, if it is to become strong, and so we do not want to ask God constantly to spare us the tests he sends our way. But there are tests that are too hard for us, and we are afraid we might not have the strength to endure them. We would certainly want to be spared such tests "which are beyond our strength" (I Cor. 10:13).

We have a prayer that has come to us from the 5th century that suggests this understanding of the petition in the Lord's Prayer: "O Lord, our God, lead us not into a temptation which we cannot endure, but show us, with the temptation the way out, so that we might be able to endure, and deliver us from evil."

The Good News Bible renders the petition this way: "Do not bring us to hard testing, but keep us safe from the Evil One." When the petition is understood in this way, we do not need to make a sharp distinction between "temptation" and "testing." "Lead us not into temptation" is then the cry of our heart, asking God to keep us safe from the Evil One (or the evil) in the hard experiences of life. We all know, that when we are overwhelmed by tragedies, there is always the temptation to become bitter and to lose faith in God.

Believers experience temptation at every stage of their



journey through life. We are tempted by our sinful desires (the flesh), and we are tempted by external circumstances (the world), as well as by the devil. In the light of our own weaknesses we ask God to keep us safe from evil, particularly when he leads us through difficult experiences in order to strengthen our faith. The New Testament does not encourage the doctrine of "eternal security," but it gives us the assurance that we will be "kept by the power of God through faith" (I Pet. 1:5).

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### ***4. Why did Jesus send his disciples on a mission "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," and not to the Gentiles? (Matthew 10:5,6)***

Some critical scholars have expressed doubts about the authenticity of this strange saying of Jesus. They seemingly cannot grasp the significance of this restriction, when so many other sayings of Jesus make it explicitly clear that he had come to be the Savior of the world. But the apostles did not create sayings of Jesus that had no basis in fact.

Moreover, Matthew cannot be accused of ethnocentricity, for his Gospel clearly teaches that Christ came to redeem all humankind. Only Matthew reports on the coming of the Magi to worship the newborn King, at the beginning of the Gospel (Mt. 2). And he ends his Gospel with the so-called Great Commission, commanding his disciples to make disciples of all nations (Mt. 28). Surely Matthew cannot be accused of limiting Christ's saving purposes to the Jewish people alone.

Besides, Matthew reports a number of sayings of Jesus in which Gentiles are the focus of his love and concern. In the story of the healing of the centurion's son, we read, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith" (Mt. 8:10). And immediately following, we have these words of Jesus: "I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into outer darkness" (Mt. 8:11,12). Clearly Matthew cannot be accused of pro-Jewish feelings when he reports the restriction, which Jesus imposed on his disciples when he sent them out on their mission.

What then do we make of Jesus' command, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter not the towns of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel?" Let us approach this restriction one step at a time! First, the prophets of the Old Testament were deeply convinced that salvation would come to the Gentiles through Israel. God had chosen Israel as his agent through whom the good news of redemption should be brought to the whole

world. "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth," says the prophet (Isa. 49:6). When God chose Abraham it was with the hope that he and his family would be a channel of blessing to the world. Israel was to receive the revelation of God and then spread the light among the nations. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, acknowledges the priority of Israel in God's plan of salvation: "to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16). And so it should not surprise us when Jesus sends his disciples to the Jews first.

Second there may also have been a practical reason why Jesus wanted his disciples to limit their mission to Israel. Their mission was of short duration, it was a kind of "trial" mission for the day when they would take the gospel to the ends of the earth. It would have been quite impossible for the Twelve to proclaim the good news of the kingdom in all the land, including Gentile and Samaritan towns. Moreover, the Twelve were not yet sufficiently prepared to go into all the world with the gospel. Although they had been taught by the best teacher imaginable, they had not yet fully grasped the meaning of the kingdom of God. For example, they did not yet see clearly how Jesus' death fits into the salvatory purpose of God. And even after Jesus' death and resurrection, they still ask whether Christ is about to establish the kingdom to Israel--a question, which Jesus brushed aside (Acts 1:6). In due time they will go to the Gentiles, but the Gentile mission lay beyond the cross and the exaltation of Jesus.

Third, as just stated, there was a profound theological reason why the disciples were not yet to go to the Gentiles. Before they could proclaim "the word of the cross," Jesus must die for the sins of the world. The risen Christ explained to the Twelve after his resurrection, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations" (Lk. 24:26,47). Also, it was after his resurrection that Jesus said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Only after Christ's glorification and the outpouring of his Spirit would the

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disciples be prepared to take the good news of the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles. And, as the book of Acts so plainly shows, this is in fact what happened. Philip brings the gospel to the Samaritans (Acts 8), Peter brings it to the Gentiles (Acts 10), and Paul is called to take the good news to the ends of the earth.

**5. What did Jesus mean when he said, "from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and the violent take it by force" (Matthew 11:12)?**

This saying of Jesus is rather difficult to understand. Moreover Luke gives it in a somewhat different form (Lk. 16:16). The different translations of this verse in English reflect the puzzlement of interpreters. In a case where the Greek text lends itself to different translations, we cannot be dogmatic. However, we can weigh the possible meanings and then decide on the meaning that seems best to fit the context.

Before we suggest possible meanings of this saying, we should clarify a few expressions. "From the days of John the Baptist," could mean from the time he was born, or, from the time of his death, or, from the time he began to preach. Since the ministry of the Baptist is in focus in the context, it is best to understand this expression to be a reference to John's proclamation of the kingdom of heaven that was beginning to break into time.

Also, we should be clear on what is meant by "the kingdom of heaven." Matthew regularly uses "kingdom of heaven" where Luke has "kingdom of God." They obviously refer to the same reality. That Matthew should prefer "kingdom of heaven" can be explained by the fact that he has Jewish readers in mind. Jews tended to use the name of God sparingly and preferred to use surrogates. One of these substitutes for "God" was "heaven" (usually in the plural, because the Hebrew has only a plural). Luke does use heaven instead of God upon occasion. For example, when the prodigal son returned home to his father, he confessed, "I have sinned against heaven and against you," meaning, against God and against his father. The word "kingdom" in our text refers to God's reign. It has nothing to do with territory, it means God's rule over the hearts and lives of people who acknowledge him as sovereign.

With the proclamation of the Baptist, that the kingdom of heaven was breaking in (assuming that the verb is in the passive), the kingdom has suffered violence. In other words, people have offered fierce resistance to the kingdom of God; they have attacked

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it. John had proclaimed the good news, that God was about to establish his reign, but Herod had silenced him, by putting him in prison, and would eventually have him killed. This resistance to God's reign began with John's ministry and continued in the ministry of Jesus.

Just what is meant by "men of violence take it by force," is not quite clear. One possibility is that Jesus has political activists in mind who tried to divert John's mission into one of national liberation, but we have no clear evidence that this was happening. More commonly the men of violence are thought of as the enemies of the kingdom, such as Herod, who had John killed, and thereby foreshadowed the fate of Jesus. Some commentators suggest that "the men of violence" is a reference to the Zealots who wanted to bring in the (political) kingdom by force, leading in the end to the destruction of Jerusalem. Such attempts to bring in the kingdom of force are condemned by Jesus. When Pilate asked him whether he was a king, he explained that his kingdom was not of this world. If it were, his disciples would fight, but the kingdom of God was to be established by Christ's suffering and death, not by force.

It is possible, however, that the voice of the verb is to be read as a middle and not as a passive. Then one could possibly translate this saying of Jesus as "the kingdom of heaven has been coming violently" or "the kingdom of heaven has been making its way with triumphant force." Then the saying takes on a positive meaning. This is how the NIV translators understood it: "The kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it."

To lay hold of the kingdom with force is then understood to mean, that as God's kingdom makes its way triumphantly, there are those who will do their utmost to lay hold of it. Since the days when John began announcing the inbreaking of the kingdom, Jesus has picked up this theme. As people listen to his message and are convinced that by his coming the reign of God has begun, they will sacrifice everything to enter into this kingdom, to lay hold of it. The presence of the kingdom demands that people make radical decisions, lest the day of God's favor pass them by.

This positive interpretation seems to have support from the

parallel in Luke 16:16, "and everyone tries to enter it by force." However, this positive way of reading Matthew 11:12 is not the preferred interpretation of the majority of scholars. It is probably best to understand Jesus' saying to mean: "There have been attacks against God's rule, and violent people have tried to establish it by force, but that's not the way God's kingdom comes."

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**6. How are we to understand the parable of the wheat and the weeds in which it is stated, "Let both of them grow together" (Matthew 13:30)?**

A parable, as a rule, has one basic thrust, one central teaching. One must not derive all kinds of theological meanings out of the details of a parabolic story; they belong to the setting, the backcloth, the staging.

In this parable Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a farmer who has sown good seed in his field. At night his enemy comes and secretly scatters weed seed on his seeded land. Evidently he wanted to even a score with this farmer. It was an evil practice, well-known in the oriental world. As the wheat grew, so did the weeds. At first the two were hard to distinguish, as any farmer who has had to contend with wild oats knows. Once the wheat and the weeds are ripe, they can be clearly distinguished one from the other.

The servants of this farmer offer to tear out the weeds, when they saw them spring up together with the grain. But that would ruin the wheat as well, for weeds and wheat were intertwined, and to tear out the weeds meant also tearing out the wheat plants. Nothing further can be done but to wait for the harvest season when both weeds and wheat will be cut down by the reapers. The weeds will then be gathered in bundles for fuel, and the wheat will be threshed and stored in the granary.

After Jesus had told this parable and the crowds had left, his disciples asked for an explanation of this parable. Jesus then makes it plain, that the Son of Man is the one who sows the good seed on the field, which is the world, i.e., humanity. The good seed are the children of the kingdom, the weeds are the children of the evil one, the enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels.

At the end of the age, according to this parable, the Son of Man will send out his angels and they will collect the evildoers and cast them into a fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. The righteous, by contrast, will shine like the



sun in the kingdom of their Father.

This parable portrays the judgment on this world at the end of the age. It is not a parable that speaks to the question of church discipline. The words "let them grow together," have been used as an argument against any form of church discipline. But such an application of this saying runs counter to what the apostles clearly teach. True, the church has not been called to judge the ungodly, to "tear out" evildoers, to lead crusades against unbelievers. Paul writes, "God will judge those outside" (I Cor. 5:13), but he exhorts the church to expel those members who continue to indulge in sinful practices and do not repent.

Many Jews in Jesus' day believed that God would judge the wicked when Messiah appeared. John the Baptist warned his readers that being Jewish would not save them from the axe that was already laid at the root of the tree. The Coming One, said John, would gather the grain in his granary and burn the chaff--the same language as found in our parable.

When the Greater One appeared, and the final judgment did not take place, John began to wonder whether Jesus was the Messiah and he sent messengers to ask Jesus. Jesus answered by pointing to his deeds of grace and mercy. Clearly, the time for the final separation of the evil from the good had not yet come. That would happen at the end of the age. Before that final separation of the godly from the ungodly, the good news of the gospel was to be proclaimed, and as long as this day of grace lasts, the church invites people, both Jews and Gentiles, to turn from their sins and come to the Savior.

In the 4th century, Donatus advocated measures that would lead to a "pure" church. The great theologian, Augustine, opposed this movement. He held that the "visible" church was comprised of true believers and nominal Christians. Only the "invisible" church was a true church. He endorsed the concept of a state-church as this had been established by Constantine. The practice of infant baptism led to a strange mixture of believers and those who were Christian in name only. And so the words of our parable served Augustine as a convenient warning against any attempt to separate the two. "Let them both grow together," was his counsel.

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This concept of the church remained dominant in Western Europe even after the Protestant Reformation. The Anabaptists, who insisted on believers' baptism, broke with this pattern of church life. Only those who were baptized upon their confession of faith were accepted as members, and this meant, that when members fell into sin, they were subject to the discipline of the church. The parable of the wheat and the weeds, however, has nothing to do with church discipline.

**7. What did Jesus want to teach us with the parable of the treasure in the field and that of the precious pearl? (Matthew 13:44-46)**

These two short parables teach more or less the same thing; they are a kind of doublet. In the one parable we have a farm laborer who discovers a treasure in the field and in the other we have a merchant who is constantly on the lookout for pearls. These two persons illustrate what happens when people discover the kingdom of God (Matthew regularly has "kingdom of heaven," which was more appropriate for Jewish readers). Let us look briefly at these two parables!

First we see a poor day laborer or a man who had rented an acre from a landlord. In any case, he did not own the land. Perhaps as he plowed the field with an ox, the animal suddenly sank into the ground (the Talmud knows of such a case). Or, did the share of the plow strike an immovable object in the ground? In any case, this laborer made a discovery, he found a treasure hidden in the ground.

To bury money, jewelry, and other valuables in the ground was not all that rare in ancient Israel. When a country is ravaged by war again and again, one can understand why people would want to stash away their valuables where they could find them again when hostilities ceased. In the Parable of the Talents (Mt. 25:18) we read of a man who buried his talent in the ground.

In our parable the man who found the treasure in the field was so overwhelmed with the joy of discovery, that he sold all that he had and purchased the entire field. In that way he made sure that the treasure belonged to him. According to rabbinic law, people who made such finds were allowed to keep them. Jesus does not discuss the ethics of this man's action; that would have diverted our attention from the main thrust of the parable.

Jesus wanted to underscore that the discovery of the kingdom of God is the greatest treasure a person can find, and when a person discovers the kingdom, he or she will be so overwhelmed with joy, that they are willing to sacrifice everything

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for the sake of the kingdom. Although Jesus made no outright appeal to his audience to embrace the kingdom, which he had brought, the parable is a powerful invitation to enter the kingdom of heaven.

The parable of the precious pearl is similar in import, although some scholars point out that the treasure in the field was discovered inadvertently, whereas the pearl of great price was found after a long search. Whether Jesus intended to have people notice that distinction is not altogether clear, although it is true to life. Some people, in the words of C. S. Lewis, are "surprised by joy," whereas others may have longed and searched for the kingdom of God for many years before they discovered it.

In this second parable we see a merchant who is constantly looking for fine pearls. Pearls were found in the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, or the Persian Gulf. They were luxury items in Jesus' day. We are told that Cleopatra of Egypt, as well as the wife of the emperor Gaius Caligula, possessed pearls worth millions of dollars (in our currency). Pearls are mentioned several times in the New Testament, especially in the Book of Revelation, where they represent the glory of the new Jerusalem. That each of the gates of the city of gold should be one single pearl, staggers the imagination (Rev. 21:21).

Be that as it may, the merchant in our parable is constantly on the lookout for fine pearls (the Greek word for "pearl" is *margarites*, from where the name Margaret is derived). One day the sharp eyes of this merchant fall upon a pearl such as he had never seen before. And like the man who discovered a treasure in the field, he too sells everything he has and buys this precious pearl. Although Jesus does not specifically mention the joy of discovery in the second parable, as he does in the first, we can feel the overwhelming joy of the merchant when he discovered the pearl of great price.

And that's what people experience when they discover the kingdom of God. They know that they have stumbled, as it were, upon the greatest treasure in the world. Nothing they possess is equal in value to the kingdom of God. Whether it's a surprise discovery or whether the kingdom is found at the end of a long

search, it transcends all earthly values. And when we speak of God's kingdom, we mean God's rule over the hearts and lives of people who have come to acknowledge him as the King. One is reminded of Paul's confession, as he looked back upon the day when he discovered the kingdom of God: "Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ" (Phil. 3:7).

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**8. What did Jesus mean when he told the Syro-Phoenician woman, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (Matthew 15:26; Mark 7:27)?**

This saying must be understood in its context. After a rather grueling period of ministry and after experiencing stiff opposition from some of his Jewish countrymen, Jesus decided to withdraw from Galilee for a time. Together with his disciples he went into the district of Tyre and Sidon, in what today is called Lebanon. This was Gentile territory. Ahab's wife, who turned Israel away from God and led the country into Baal worship, came from this region. Evidently Jesus went into this Gentile territory where he could relax with his disciples without being recognized.

However, even in these regions people had heard about the mighty deeds of Jesus, and so it was quite impossible to move about incognito. A woman (probably a widow, for her husband is not mentioned), whose daughter was tormented by a demon, comes to Jesus and begs him to have mercy on her daughter. To begin with, Jesus did not respond to her request, and the disciples encourage him to send her away, "for she keeps shouting after us"(Mt. 15:23).

Mark adds that the woman was Greek (i.e., a Gentile), of Syro-Phoenician origin. Tyre and Sidon lay in the Roman province of Syria. Evidently she spoke Greek, but was Phoenician by birth. Matthew uses the old designation for a Palestinian; he calls her a "Canaanite." So we have a Gentile woman asking Jesus for help.

Jesus, in keeping with his mission, explains that he has been sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Once he will have completed his work of redemption here on earth, then the gospel will be proclaimed in the whole world, but until he has atoned for the sins of the world by his death and has poured out his Spirit, he limits himself to Israel. The day of salvation for the Gentiles lay beyond the cross and the resurrection.

But the Canaanite woman would not be put off. She comes closer and kneels before Jesus, saying, "Lord, help me." In response, Jesus speaks words that have often offended Bible

readers: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." The children are those who belong to the house of Israel; the dogs are the Gentiles. Even though many Jews rejected Jesus' message, he saw himself as offering the bread of life to his people. Much as he felt sorry for this Gentile woman, he wanted her to know that he must remain true to his calling.

The woman, however, didn't seem to be offended at all by what Jesus said. In fact, she seems to have gained new confidence by his rather enigmatic response. Perhaps the tone in which Jesus had answered her gave her assurance that he really cared about her daughter. Perhaps even the look on Jesus' face spoke of compassion. Moreover, Jesus had not used the regular word for "dog" to designate Gentiles, the one Jews customarily used. He used the diminutive "little dogs," "house pups." Such lap dogs might well be present when the family sat down for a meal, in contrast to the filthy scavengers that roamed the alleys of oriental villages. The Jews called Gentiles "dogs" because the dog symbolized the ultimate in uncleanness, and since Gentiles were thought to be idolatrous, they were called "dogs."

The woman then cleverly responds to Jesus' saying about the dogs. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." People ate with their fingers in those days and it was custom to wipe one's fingers with bread crusts, which were then thrown away. The pup under the table would be only too happy to eat such crusts. In effect she was saying: let the children (i.e., Israel) have their bread, but that doesn't mean that the lap-dog under the table can't have a few crusts. In that response lay a deep faith. She understood that Jesus had to remain true to his mission, but to throw a few crumbs to the Gentiles (the house pups) would not contravene his calling.

That elicited a joyous response on the part of Jesus. "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." Without going to her house, Jesus gives her the assurance that her daughter is healed from the unclean spirit that had plagued her. By faith the woman returns to her daughter and finds her well. The story is a foretaste of the church's world mission. When Paul wrote to the Romans he could say with great conviction, "For there is no

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distinction between Jew and Greek, the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him" (Rom 10:12).



**9. How are we to understand Jesus' prediction, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18)?**

Protestants tend to read these words with an anti-Catholic bias, and consequently find it hard to take Jesus' words at face value. Somehow it seems impossible to them that the church was to be built on Peter. It should, then, not surprise us, that numerous attempts have been made to water down the promise of Jesus. However, this passage has nothing to do with the papacy, and if we can set that interpretation aside, we are in a better position to let the text speak its own language.

Let me mention a few of the attempts to understand what Jesus meant when he promised to build the church on Peter:

(a) Some interpreters have tried to escape the plain meaning of the text by punctuating it in this way: "I tell you, Peter, on this rock (i.e., Christ) I will build my church." But the Greek text says quite literally, "And I say to you, that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church."

(b) Others have tried to distinguish between the two words for rock, found in our text. Simon's nickname was *Petros* (the Greek word for "rock"). The text would then read, "You are *Petros* (a small rock) and on this *petra* (a big rock, Christ) I will build my church." But the two forms of the word "rock" have the same meaning. *Petros* has a masculine ending because it refers to Peter, whereas *petra* is feminine. Besides, Jesus spoke Aramaic, and in that language he would have used the same words for "rock": "You are *Kepha* (Cephas in English) and on this *Kepha* I will build my church." That is precisely what we have in French: "*Tu es pierre* (rock) *et sur cette pierre* (rock) *je batisrai mon eglise*."

(c) Also, it is argued, that elsewhere in the New Testament, Christ is said to be the foundation of the church. "For no one can lay any foundation, other than the one that is lying; the foundation is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11). However, we must not overlook what Paul says in Ephesians 2:20, namely, that the church is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets," and Peter was

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the leader of the Twelve.

(d) Another way of reading Jesus' promise is: Jesus will build his church on the one whom Peter had just confessed. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," said Peter. Jesus then acknowledged that this insight had not come from flesh and blood; it was something God had revealed to him. Following his confession we have the promise to build the church, and so it is on Christ, the Son of the living God, that Christ will build his church. Ultimately that is the case, but the text doesn't exactly say that.

The New English Bible makes the meaning quite explicit: "I say to you. You are Peter, the Rock; and on this rock I will build my church." Gerhard Maier, in his German commentary on Matthew's Gospel, writes: "Peter had a unique responsibility in the history of salvation . . . such singular calling cannot be inherited or made into a permanent office" (i.e., the papacy).

The church of which Jesus spoke was born on the day of Pentecost, but Jesus foresaw that day when he uttered this promise. The Twelve were the foundation stones for this new people of God, just as the twelve patriarchs were the foundation of the old people of God. Among the Twelve, Peter was chosen to be leader. This becomes more obvious in the book of Acts. In fact the first half of that book is overshadowed by the presence of Peter (the second half concentrates on Paul's ministry).

Obviously the church is not built on a frail human being, such as Peter was by nature. But in the providence of God, Peter was given a unique responsibility as head of the Twelve. Not Peter's charisma, or the strength of his personality, or his genius enabled him to carry out his divine mandate, but only God's grace. What Paul claimed with respect to the Corinthian church, Peter was with respect to the church as a whole: "According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid the foundation" (I Cor. 3:10).

Peter had received a unique calling from the Lord; no person in succeeding generations can ever claim to have the same place in the history of the church as Peter. And so we continue to sing with confidence, "The church's one foundation, is Jesus Christ her Lord. She is his new creation, by water and the Word. From

heaven he came and sought her, to be his holy bride, with his own blood he bought her, and for her life he died." But we can also read the words Jesus spoke to Peter without distorting the plain meaning of the text.

***10. How are we to understand Jesus' words in Matthew 22:14, "For many are called but few are chosen?"***

This epigram forms the conclusion to the parable of the wedding banquet, which is one of a trilogy of parables (the parable of the two sons, Mt. 21:28-32; the parable of the wicked tenants, Mt. 21:33-46; and our parable of the banquet to which the king invited many guests, Mt. 22:1-14). Our parable has two parts to it: in verses 1-10 we have the invitation of guests to the wedding banquet which a king prepared for his son; in verses 11-13 we have an account of a guest who showed up at the banquet without the appropriate dress for the occasion. At the end of this double parable we have this observation: "Many are called, but few are chosen."

Let us look at the first part of the parable first! The kingdom of God, said Jesus, was like a king preparing a wedding banquet for his son. In keeping with the customs of that day, the king sends out messengers to invite guests orally. Such an invitation would be extended to the chosen guests shortly before the marriage supper took place. At first the messengers had little success, and so the king sent his servants out a second time to repeat the invitation. They stress that oxen and calves have been slaughtered and the meal is ready, making the invitation more urgent. But again they get little response. One goes to work on his farm, the other in his business, and some even mistreat the king's servants to the point of killing them.

This was outrageous behavior; something that normally would never happen. But Jesus wanted to shock his hearers. What the people in the parable did was precisely what was happening in Israel. Israel had repeatedly ignored the words of the prophets, including the message of John the Baptist, and had even killed some of the prophets. At the moment the Jewish people were ignoring the message of Jesus and his invitation to enter the kingdom of God, which is portrayed as an invitation to a wedding feast.

As a result of the failure of the invited guests to respond to

the king's invitation to come to the banquet, the king sends his troops to punish the murderers and to destroy their city. His sorrowful complaint is: the wedding is ready but those invited were not worthy (v. 8). Very likely Jesus had the destruction of Jerusalem in mind when he spoke these words--seen as God's judgment on an apostate nation that had failed to heed God's invitation to come to the messianic banquet proclaimed by Jesus.

Instead of those who were first invited to the banquet, the king then sends his servants out on the streets to gather all those willing to accept his invitation, so that the wedding hall might be filled with guests.

The scene then changes (v. 11). The wedding celebrations are in process when the king comes in to see who his guests are and perhaps to converse with them. (It was understood that a king would not sit at table with the guests.) Suddenly he notices a man who was not wearing a wedding robe. That would have been a grave insult in such a setting in those days. To come to a royal wedding without the proper dress was tantamount to ignoring the king's invitation as portrayed in the first part of the parable.

The king is deeply offended and commands one of his attendants to bind him and throw him into outer darkness. Darkness is one of the many metaphors for eternal punishment, and no doubt Jesus had that in mind when he spoke of "outer darkness" where there will be "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (v. 13).

What is meant with the wedding robe is not explained, but clothing often stands for a person's character. Of the redeemed who come to glory (Rev. 7) it is said, that they washed their garments white in the blood of the Lamb. Without this wedding robe no one can attend the marriage supper of the Lamb. Revelation 19:8 interprets the fine linen worn by the bride of Christ as "the righteous acts of the saints."

In the light of these parabolic sayings of Jesus, the closing words must mean something to the effect, that many are being invited, but not all accept the invitation and therefore do not belong to "the elect" (a designation for the true people of God). The first part of the parable describes the fate of those who reject God's invitation to enter his kingdom, the second part speaks of those

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who fail to meet the conditions. The invitation had gone out to all Israel, but relatively few accept Jesus' message. Only those who received the good news of the kingdom and declared their willingness to follow Jesus were members of God's elect. The parable should not be used to argue for a doctrine of election which rules out the human response to God's offer of salvation. What happened in the days of Jesus is unfortunately happening in our day as well. Many hear the good news of the gospel, but refuse to accept and as a consequence are lost.

***11. What kind of kingdom is Jesus speaking about in Matthew 25:31-46? Is it identical with the "the kingdom of God?" Is it possible to enter the eternal kingdom on the basis of good deeds?***

The kingdom Jesus had in mind when he spoke this parable of the sheep and the goats is the kingdom of God or, as most frequently found in Matthew, the kingdom of the heavens (the latter would be preferred by Jewish readers). The kingdom of God means the "reign" of God, which broke into human history in great power with the coming of Jesus. The basic message of Jesus was, that God's reign was being established. All the parables of Jesus are "kingdom" parables.

The presence of God's kingdom in the person, the works and the words of Jesus, however, does not rule out a future dimension to God's reign which is not yet visible. Several of Jesus' parables, including the one in our text, are eschatological in nature; they portray what will happen at the end of the present age, when time gives way to eternity, and God's eternal kingdom dawns. This coming kingdom is described as glorious. God is inviting people into his kingdom and his glory (1 Thess. 2:12). Flesh and blood, says Paul, cannot inherit that kingdom which still lies in the future (I Cor. 15:50), and for that reason our bodies will need to be transformed when Christ returns.

This coming kingdom is portrayed in many different ways in the New Testament: it is the golden city, the new Jerusalem, the eternal tents, the Father's house, Abraham's bosom, a house not made with hands, and so forth. Our parable speaks of the entrance into this eternal kingdom. On the last day the king will say to those who belong to him, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world (Mt. 25:34). By contrast, those who do not belong to him will hear the words, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (v. 41).

This parable focuses on the final judgment, which takes place when "the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him" (v. 31). Christ will sit on his throne and all humanity

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(here called "all nations") will be gathered before him (v. 32). As a rule, God is portrayed as the judge of all the earth, but according to John 5:27, God has given all judgment over to his Son.

The division of humankind into those who enter the eternal kingdom and those who are lost is portrayed by imagery taking from pastoral life. Sheep and goats were normally shepherded together during the day. For the night, however, they were separated, for goats demand a warmer barn. In the evening, then, when the herd returned from grazing, the shepherd would stand with his rod and separate the sheep from the goats. And that is the picture Jesus uses to portray the final judgment: those to the right go into God's eternal kingdom; those to the left go into the eternal fire.

What often puzzles Bible readers is the basis on which Christ determines who will stand at the right and who at the left. He mentions only their deeds of mercy and kindness. As evangelical believers we would have expected the determination to be made on the basis of faith, but it is made on the basis of works. Does that not run contrary to one of the fundamental teachings of the New Testament: that we are saved by grace through faith, and not by works? Actually not! All we need to do is to read James 2:17, in which the apostle makes plain, that a faith that does not lead to good works is dead. Only a living faith guarantees us entrance into God's eternal kingdom.

And how does a living faith express itself? In feeding the hungry, in giving water to the thirsty, sheltering strangers, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the prisoners, and so forth. There is then no contradiction between "justification by faith" and "justification by works" (as James speaks of it).

It is worth noting that the righteous in our parable are surprised by the divine judge's commendation. They had not done these deeds of mercy to earn their salvation; they hadn't even kept track of them; they were simply expressions of their living faith. They had responded to God's grace and these good deeds flowed out of their new relationship with Christ.

These good deeds were done "to the least of these my brothers." That has been understood by some to be a reference to



the Jewish people, who have often been mistreated, as well as treated kindly. However, "brothers" can be a reference to Jesus' family (Mk. 3:34,35), or, to all people in need.

The New Testament clearly teaches that deeds of kindness do not in and of themselves secure salvation for us, it also teaches that when faith is real it must of necessity express itself in a concern for others.

**12. The place of Jesus' crucifixion is sometimes called "Calvary" and at other times "Golgatha" (Matthew 27:33). What is the difference between these two?**

Three of our four Gospels report that Jesus was crucified on Gulgatha (Mt. 27:33; Mk. 15:22; Jn. 19:17). This is a Semitic word ("Gulgoleth" in Hebrew; "Golgotha" or "Gulgatha" in Aramaic) and means "the place of a skull." Matthew and Mark in fact, after mentioning this Semitic place-name, translate it for us into Greek. John, by contrast, calls the place of crucifixion "the place of the skull," and then adds the Hebrew (Aramaic) name "Golgatha". Luke omits the Semitic word altogether and writes simply, "When they came to the place called The Skull, they crucified Jesus" (Lk. 23:33).

The Greek word for "skull" is *kranion* (English: "cranium"). In Latin the word for skull is *calva*, and for that reason the place of crucifixion is also called "Calvary" in English. Calvary, therefore, is the same word basically as Golgotha, only that it has a Latin root, whereas Golgotha is Semitic.

Unfortunately we do not know precisely where Golgotha is located; nor do we really know why it was called the place of a skull. One explanation is, that it was a place where executions had happened before and that the skulls of criminals were still lying about. Since criminals were often left unburied, wild animals and birds would eat the flesh of the deceased and their skulls and bones were left exposed.

There is a Christian legend, in which it is claimed that Golgotha was called the place of the skull because Adam lay buried here. Unfortunately this legend has no basis in historical fact. One can easily understand how such a legend might arise. The last Adam, Christ, by his death atoned for the sin of the first Adam. Jesus delivered humanity from the curse of eternal death that hung over the first Adam, when he died on Calvary.

Others have tried to explain the place name, Calvary, in terms of topography. The hill on which Christ was crucified, it is claimed, looks somewhat like a skull. In the 4th century the

emperor Constantine ordered, that the Venus temple be removed from the sacred ground on which Jesus was crucified and a church be built in its place. However, in the 19th century, General Gordon identified Calvary as a hill, which has some resemblance with a skull, close to the Damascusgate. But there is no unanimity on the exact place of Jesus' crucifixion.

What can we learn about this place from the Gospels themselves? John reports, that the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city (Jn. 19:20). Because the cross stood near the city (but not in the city) many were able to read the inscription that was affixed to the cross, written in the three common languages of the day (Latin, Greek and Hebrew/Aramaic). The inscription indicated the reason for Jesus' crucifixion: he had claimed to be king of the Jews. Moreover, Calvary lay next to a road. Matthew tells us that "those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads" (Mt. 27:39). Because he reports that the crucifixion could be observed from a distance (Mt. 27:55), we can assume that Calvary was on a hill.

Christian tradition is almost unanimous on the point, that Jesus was crucified on a hill. This conviction is deeply embedded in our hymnody: "There Is a Green Hill Far Away," "On a Hill Far Away, Stands an Old Rugged Cross," and so forth.

Crucifixion was actually not a Jewish practice. For heinous crimes the Old Testament ordered that criminals be stoned to death and then hung on a stake for all to witness. Deuteronomy 21:23 has it, that everyone who hangs upon a tree is accursed of God, and that is no doubt the reason the Sanhedrin insisted that Jesus be crucified.

To be crucified was an awfully shameful way to die. The Roman historian, Cicero, asks: "What shall I say about crucifixion? There is no word that can properly describe such a heinous act." The Romans had taken over this cruel practice from Eastern peoples and only slaves and rebellious provincials could be subjected to such a shameful death.

Roman citizens could not be punished in this manner. It should not surprise us, therefore, that the Gospel writers do not actually give us any details about the process of the crucifixion of

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Jesus. Mark reports it in 3 words: "They crucified him" (15:24). It almost seems as if he purposely avoided the gruesome details. Neither do the Gospel writers elaborate on the physical sufferings of Jesus, other than that he was thirsty.

Neither the place of his death, nor the torments are at the centre of the Gospel accounts. What really matters is, that he died to give us eternal life.

### **13. Why was Jesus baptized? (Mark 1:9-11)**

This question has been asked repeatedly from the early centuries of the Christian era up to the present. Some early Christians were somewhat embarrassed by the Gospel account of the baptism of a sinless Messiah. One can sense this, for example, in a comment that comes from the apocryphal Gospel of the Hebrews: "The mother of the Lord said to him, 'John the Baptist baptizes for the remission of sins, let us go and be baptized by him'. But he said to them, 'what sin have I committed. that I should go and be baptized by him? Except perchance this very thing that I have said, is a sin of ignorance'."

In this imaginary dialogue the problem of the baptism of Jesus is clearly illustrated. Jesus was sinless, and we can be sure that he did not confess any sins when he asked John to baptize him.

John, in fact, hesitated to begin with to baptize Jesus. Our Lord then explained "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt. 3:15).

Some have understood this saying to mean, that Jesus was about to begin his mission which would lead him to suffering and death, and in that way he would make it possible for sinful people to receive a righteousness that God will accept. But such a very Pauline concept does not seem to fit this context. Others think Jesus meant nothing more than, "John, please baptize me; don't ask too many questions; just do what is proper and right."

But there is another way of reading this explanation of Jesus. In Matthew 21:32 Jesus says, "For John came to you in the way of righteousness." In other words, he taught how people ought to live. And when Jesus came to be baptized, he endorsed John's message by his baptism. But before we say more on the reason for Jesus' baptism, let us look briefly at the account itself.

When Jesus came up out of the water the heavens opened up (Mk. 1:10). Hundreds of years ago the prophet Isaiah had cried to God, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down" (Isa. 64:1). And the prophet Ezekiel experienced the opening of the heavens and he saw visions of God (Ez. 1:1). An open heaven

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means that God is revealing himself.

As the heavens opened the Spirit descended on our Lord like a dove. Jesus was conceived by the Spirit; he was the Bearer of the Spirit; and here he is anointed with the Spirit. Anointing means calling and equipping for a prophetic ministry. When Jesus began his ministry in Nazareth, he applied the words of Isaiah to himself, "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me (Isa. 61:1).

Not only was Jesus anointed with the Spirit, but his calling was also confirmed with a voice from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This saying combines two Old Testament passages. "You are my Son, today I have begotten you" comes from Psalm 2:7; "behold my servant . . . in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him," comes from Isaiah 42:1.

By combining these two Old Testament passages and applying them to Jesus, two prophetic lines are brought together. Psalm 2:7 is found in the context of Davidic kingship; Isaiah 42:1 speaks of the suffering Servant of God, who gives his life for others (Isa. 53). Kingship and cross converge in the person and ministry of Jesus. By his suffering and death he establishes his kingship, his reign over the hearts and lives of people. And when he was baptized he entered upon his mission which would lead first to death and then to eternal kingship.

We are now in a better position to answer the question: why was Jesus baptized? It was a decisive moment in history. The kingdom of God, which was about to break in, according to the Baptist, was now to be inaugurated by a suffering Messiah. The Father affirmed his Son in this calling with the words from heaven.

Equipped with the Spirit and confirmed by the Father, Jesus, by his baptism, identifies himself with sinful humanity. He stands where other sinners stand and begins to walk on the road that will lead him to Calvary where he will atone for the sins of the world.

The baptism with water was his initiation into his Messianic mission, which would lead to his baptism of death. He called his suffering and death, a baptism (Mk. 10:39). By his baptism with water Jesus dedicated his life to carrying out his redemptive

mission.

The baptism of Jesus is not simply a model for believers to imitate. The receipt of the Spirit and water baptism are often mentioned as two aspects of believers' baptism, but that does not mean that our baptism and the baptism of Jesus are similar in meaning. His baptism is unique, it is messianic.

**14. Why did Jesus go into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil? (Mark 1:12,13)**

The temptation of Jesus is closely connected with his baptism. The Spirit with which he was anointed when he came out of the waters of Jordan, immediately "drove him out into the wilderness." The word "drove" is not used here in its full strength and has nothing to do with resistance to the Spirit's leading on the part of Jesus. In the parallel passages (Mt. 4:1; Lk. 4:1) we have simply, "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness." It is possible that the word "drove" in Mark refers to Jesus' inner compulsion to carry out his mission of salvation. In any case, the impulse to go into the wilderness did not come from selfish motives, but is attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit.

For forty days Jesus fasted in the wilderness. The number 40 had already taken on the symbolic meaning of testing. It had rained for 40 days and 40 nights at the time of the Deluge. Elijah had been in the wilderness for 40 days (I Kgs. 19:8); Moses had led Israel through the wilderness for 40 years (one year for each of the 40 days that the spies were in the land of promise); the Philistines harassed Israel for 40 years (Jdg. 13:1). So there had been a number of periods of testing that lasted 40 days or years.

Bible scholars have often seen a reflection of the temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden in the temptation of Jesus.

In a painting from the 16th century, in fact, where the artist has tried to portray the temptation of Jesus, he has Adam and Eve in the background of the picture. The first Adam fell into sin in the best circumstances, in paradise; the last Adam was victorious in the worst circumstances--in the loneliness of the wilderness, with the wild beasts, having fasted for 40 days and nights.

Matthew and Luke mention three specific temptations of Jesus by the devil at the end of the 40 days, but Luke makes it clear, that Jesus was also tempted throughout these 40 days. At the end of 40 days of testing, Satan confronted him and tried in every manner possible to divert Jesus from his divine calling.

The three temptations recorded in Matthew and Luke seem



to reflect some of the popular but perverse Jewish notions about what Messiah was to do and what he would be like.

First Satan tempts Jesus to turn stones into bread. In Judaism the hope that Messiah would feed his people was wide spread. No one would hunger or thirst once the Messianic age would begin. One can see this view reflected in the attempt on the part of the populace to make Jesus king when he fed the five-thousand. Moses had provided bread for Israel in the wilderness, and surely the One greater than Moses would do no less. But Jesus had come to redeem humanity from sin and death and not simply to perform miracles. Repeatedly when Jesus did miracles and people were overwhelmed by the power of Jesus, he withdrew. Here, at the beginning of his ministry, he rejected all demonstrations of power for selfish purposes.

The temptation to jump from the pinnacle of the temple was strengthened by Satan with a quotation from the Scriptures. He mentions the assurance God gave the Psalmist, that angels would carry him so that he would not dash his foot against a stone. But Jesus would not be taken in by such a misuse of Scripture. Evidently there was the notion among Jesus' contemporaries, that the coming Messiah would manifest himself at the Passover feast. He would do this by jumping from the temple pinnacle in full view of the thousands of onlookers. But Jesus did not respond to such fanciful expectations.

The temptation to gain the lordship over this world through compromise, was also rejected by Jesus. In some Jewish circles Messiah was thought of as warrior, as military leader, who would, with the help of the angels, drive the Romans out of the land and cleanse the land of sinners. But Jesus did not want to gain the lordship over humanity by military force, by the use of arms. He explained before Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world. If it were, he said, his disciples would fight. No, Jesus will gain the lordship over this world, but he will do so by going the path of obedience to the Father, by suffering and finally, by dying for the sins of the world.

Once the devil had completed his temptations, having attacked Jesus from every angle but failing to bring him down, he

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left him, waiting for a "more opportune time" (Lk. 4:13). He tried to deter him from the path of obedience in Gethsemane, and no doubt rejoiced when Jesus was finally put to death. But by his death and his resurrection Jesus broke Satan's power. He was tempted in every respect as we are, but he did not sin (Heb. 4:15).

***15. A paralytic was brought before Jesus for physical healing. Jesus began by forgiving his sins. Is there a connection between healing and forgiveness? (Mark 2:1-12)***

The account of the healing of the paralytic, according to Mark's Gospel, belongs to a series of controversial stories. It is another of the many wondrous deeds of Jesus that brought the criticism of the scribes down upon him.

The healing took place in a house in Capernaum, crowded with people who were listening to the teachings of Jesus. Four friends of the paralytic carried him to the top of the flat roof of the house (by an outside ladder), made a hole in the roof, and then lowered him through this opening. When Jesus saw their faith he said, "Son, your sins are forgiven" (Mk 2:5).

From this saying it appears there is a connection between physical healing and sin. We gather from the story of the Fall of man into sin, that physical sickness, in general, is a consequence of sin. When Jesus died on the cross he broke the power of sin and all who belong to him have the assurance that in the age to come they will be free from all sickness and diseases.

Sometimes sickness is the direct result of particular sin or sins. People often die of AIDS as a result of sexual immorality. Others die of lung cancer after years of inhaling nicotine. Diseases of the liver are often the result of too much alcohol. And we all know how debilitating the use of narcotics and mind-altering drugs can be. However, the account of the healing of the paralytic does not suggest that his sickness was the result of a particular sin that he had committed, although that can't be ruled out altogether.

Jesus repeatedly rejected the conclusion on the part of his contemporaries, that sickness and disease was a direct consequence of a particular sin. When his disciples saw the man born blind (John 9), they asked, "who has sinned, this man or his parents?" Jesus responds by explaining that neither he nor his parents were the cause of his blindness. He also reminded his hearers on another occasion, that the eighteen people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell, were not greater sinners than others (Lk. 13:lff.).

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Therefore we must be very cautious not to make a direct link between sickness and sin in a person's life.

Already in the Old Testament we have clear indications that the law of retribution cannot be applied to every tragedy in an individual's life. The godly Job lost everything, including his health, and his friends were sure that he had sinned. But in the end it turned out that they were badly mistaken.

The paralytic in the Gospel story was brought to Jesus in what almost seems like a desperate attempt to be restored to physical health. But when Jesus saw him, he looked deeper and he heard also the cry of his heart for the forgiveness of sins. And so our Lord dealt with his deepest need first.

This stirred up the wrath of the scribes who thought Jesus was blaspheming, because according to their understanding, only God could forgive sins. And they were right, only God can forgive sins. They thought Jesus had presumed upon God's prerogative, and that was blasphemy. But they had overlooked the fact (or rejected it) that Jesus was God's Son, God's representative here on earth. He had been authorized by his Father to act in his name, and that included the authority to forgive sins.

They could have known from their Scriptures that God had authorized prophetically gifted men in the past to convey the message of forgiveness to people who had sinned. When David had sinned so egregiously, the prophet Nathan brought him to his knees, and then gave him the good news: "God has forgiven your sins." But the scribes in our passage had rejected the messianic calling of Jesus and so could not see how he had the authority to forgive sins.

Jesus read their thoughts and asked them, "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'?" A skeptic might think it is easier to forgive sins, for that is something one cannot prove. But if the paralytic gets up and walks, then one cannot help but believe that Jesus has the authority to forgive sins. No human being has the power to heal a paralytic by a word of command. But that's precisely what Jesus did, and thereby he demonstrated that he also had the divine authority to forgive sins.

From this Gospel account we can see clearly that Jesus not only has the power to heal, but also that he has the authority to meet the deepest need of the human heart--the need for forgiveness of sins.

***16. What did Jesus want to say with the new patch on an old garment and with the new wine in old wineskins? (Mark 2:21,22)***

The answer to this question must be sought in Jesus' response to the question of fasting (Mk. 2:18-20). John the Baptist's disciples and also the Pharisees practiced fasting, and they wanted to know why Jesus' disciples did not do the same. Fasting was often connected with mourning. People fasted when they sorrowed over the loss of a loved one, or when they repented of sins, or when they were weighed down by the ungodliness in their society, or because of national disasters. One might abstain from food, tear one's clothing, put ashes on one's head, go unwashed, go barefoot, and so forth. The Old Testament did not prescribe fast days (other than the Day of Atonement), but in Judaism fasting was considered to be a sign of religious devotion.

Jesus responds to the question: "The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they?" When weddings took place in a Palestinian village, all fasting ceased. Scribes even interrupted their study of the Torah in order to participate in the joys of the wedding. Enemies were reconciled, people made music and danced. Wedding celebrations normally lasted seven days.

As long as the bridegroom was among the wedding guests, Jesus explained, fasting was inappropriate. The bridegroom in this passage is, of course, Jesus himself, and his disciples are the wedding guests. It is a time of joy. However, the day will come when the bridegroom will be taken away, then Jesus' followers will fast. That's a reference to the death of Jesus and his return to his heavenly existence. In other words, when Jesus will no longer be among his disciples bodily, they will fast. They will be sad when he leaves (John 16:20). Today Jesus is not with us and his bodily absence creates a spirit of heaviness or mourning. His people cannot constantly live on cloud nine and rejoice. Often they have to suffer and weep the tears of human nature.

Having made that clear, Jesus uses two illustrations to underscore what he has just said about fasting. "No one sews a

piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made" (2:21).

It may be that Jesus was quoting a proverbial saying to indicate that certain things just don't go together--new patches on old clothes, new wine in old wineskins. In less affluent societies, where clothes are worn much longer than in ours, patching holes in aging cloth is common practice. But one cannot use new cloth that is unshrunk, to patch a tear in old clothes. When the new patch shrinks, it will make the tear even worse. Old clothes must be patched with old cloth.

The message of Jesus concerning the inbreaking of the kingdom of God is likened to the new cloth on the old garment of Judaism. It doesn't fit. Jesus' teachings in many respects are radically different from the religious outlook of contemporary Judaism. Jesus did not come simply to patch up the holes in Judaism. His message just cannot be contained in the religious framework of the religion of his day. It breaks new ground.

One must not infer from this saying of Jesus, that when a Christian church today is something less than the ideal, one should discard it as incorrigible. Nor is Jesus suggesting that everything that is old is bad and that only the new is good (often it is the reverse). Our Lord wanted to underscore that it was quite impossible to integrate his disciples into the traditional practices of Judaism.

"And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."

This second parable underscores what was said in the first. In Palestine wine was kept in sheep or goat skins. New skins were relatively elastic and would expand somewhat as the wine fermented. However, if new wine was poured into old wine skins, they would burst when the wine fermented. New wine needs new wineskins.

Jesus' teachings could not be contained in the rigid practices of Judaism. His message broke through the old containers. He did not come to repair and improve Judaism; he came with the message

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of the kingdom of God, and that message needed new channels, new forms. Jesus' words and deeds led to the creation of a new people of God. The new wine of the kingdom called for new wineskins. Although the New Testament church carried over much that was valuable from the Jewish synagogue, it left the forms of Judaism behind and created new forms, new wineskins.



***17. Why did Jesus choose twelve disciples whom he appointed as apostles? (Mark 3:13-19)***

Twelve is a significant number in both the Old as well as the New Testament. Beginning with the twelve sons of Jacob in Genesis the number twelve occurs over and over again, reaching right into the last book of the Bible. The names of the twelve tribes appear on the gates of the eternal city and the names of the twelve apostles are inscribed on the foundations of the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:12-14).

The twelve sons of Jacob, who inherited the promises of the Abrahamic covenant, grew into twelve tribes. After a lengthy sojourn in Egypt, God delivered his chosen people from slavery and renewed the covenant with them at Sinai. Unfortunately Israel became wayward and failed to keep its covenant commitments. During the dark days of the nation's apostasy from Yahweh, the prophet Jeremiah predicted that God would some day make a new covenant (Jer. 31).

In the fullness of time, Jesus began his messianic ministry in Galilee. One of the first steps he took to create a new people of God was to call twelve men to become his disciples. Like the twelve patriarchs of the Old Testament, these twelve were to be the foundation stones for the emerging church, the new covenant people. Every Jew who saw Jesus moving through Galilee with his twelve disciples must have guessed, that he was planning to establish a new people of God.

Old Testament names for Israel were easily carried over to this emerging church, because the church had its roots in the true covenant people of the past. The apostle James, for example, in his letter to Christian readers, addresses them as "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (1:1). And the apostle Peter calls the church "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (I Pet. 1:9), as well as "exiles of the Dispersion" (I Pet. 1:1).

John, in the Revelation, speaks of the people of God in their totality, numbered by God, as 144,000, who carry God's stamp, i.e., they belong to him.

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These 144,000 are comprised of 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes (Rev. 7:5-8). That these are the true people of God can be seen clearly from Revelation 14:4, where the 144,000 are said to be followers of the Lamb.

After Jesus had chosen his twelve disciples, Peter, assisted by James and John, became the leader of the apostolic band. In all the lists of the twelve disciples he stands at the head. Even though he shamefully denied his Lord, he repented and was restored and recommissioned by the risen Christ.

One of the twelve, namely Judas, became apostate and betrayed his Master. But the number twelve was to remain intact. After Christ's ascension, but before the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, Peter took the initiative in the process by which Judas was replaced by Matthias--a man who had followed Jesus from the beginning of his ministry and had witnessed his resurrection.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul explains that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20). These apostles and prophets were recipients of divine revelation (Eph. 3:5). Once the church was established the twelve slowly recede into the background. One after the other dies or is killed, but none of them is replaced. Gradually the church chooses elders to lead the congregations of believers. They are replaced when they die, but the twelve apostles are unique; they are the foundation stones of the new people of God. And since the church has its roots in Old Testament, the names of the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles appear in John's description of the eternal city, where all the saints of the ages will be gathered when the present age comes to an end. There were some other apostles besides the twelve, such as Paul, and they too played an important role in the early church, but they were not members of the founding fathers, the twelve disciples of Jesus.

The names of the twelve apostles bear close resemblance to those of the patriarchs (Simon, Judas, James), whose names were popular in Judaism. However, at the time of Jesus, the Greek influence over the Jews was quite strong, and so we have a few Greek names, as well (Andrew, Philip). Since some of the names of the twelve were so common, they are given nicknames or

patronymics (i.e., the father's name is also given).

These twelve men were not better than other people. But they were chosen by Jesus to carry out the mission that had originally been entrusted to the patriarchs: to bring the light to the whole world. Jesus wrote no books, but he trained the twelve so that they might carry on his saving work after his death and exaltation. In that calling they were faithful.

**18. According to Mark 4:12 it almost seems as if Jesus spoke in parables to hide the truth from his hearers. But surely that cannot be so. Then how are we to understand this saying of our Lord?**

The passage in question follows immediately upon the parable of the Sower (Mk. 4:1-9), which was spoken to a large crowd by the sea. Later, when Jesus was alone with his disciples, they asked him about this parable. In response Jesus explains, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables" in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven' " (vv. 10-12),

Perhaps the place to begin is to listen what Mark says later in the chapter: "With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it, he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples" (vv. 33,34). This passage makes it explicitly clear, that Jesus used parables to get his message across to his hearers. To teach in parables was a well-known teaching method at the time of Jesus. Picture language helps listeners to grasp the truth that is being proclaimed. In the case of Jesus it was the message of the inbreaking of the kingdom of God that he wanted them to understand.

But how does Mark 4:12 fit into this concern of Jesus to make himself understood? Some critical scholars do not accept this verse as an authentic saying of Jesus. Wilhelm Wrede wrote a book at the turn of the last century in which he refuses to attribute such an "awful" (*grausam*) saying to Jesus. Others attribute the saying to Mark who put words that come from the early church, into the mouth of Jesus. However, there must be better ways to understand this word of Jesus.

It is possible that the conjunction *hina* ("in order that") is used here, not to express purpose but rather to express cause. "Because" people were not really listening to the message of Jesus, their hearts were hardened. Also, it has been suggested that *hina* is used here somewhat like a relative pronoun "who." Those who see

and don't perceive, who listen but don't understand are hardened by Jesus' message and do not repent. Or, one might read *hina* as expressing result. Because people were not listening to Jesus with a receptive heart, their eyes are blinded and their hearts are hardened as a consequence.

In his book on parables, Joachim Jeremias suggests that we read *hina* as expressing purpose, but that we need to add mentally, "in order that it may be fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah," namely people hear the message but reject it and so what happened in the days of Isaiah is happening again in the ministry of Jesus: people are blinded and hardened.

Let me suggest a way of reading the passage which, I believe, makes reasonably good sense: "To you (the disciples) has been given (by God) the secret (the revelation) of the kingdom of God, but to those outside (unbelievers), everything comes in riddles." Behind the Greek word *parabole* lies the Hebrew word *mashal* which is much wider in meaning and can mean also puzzle or riddle.

To people who refuse to open their hearts to the message of Jesus, his teachings, including his parabolic sayings, make no sense, for without opening one's hearts to Jesus' message one can't understand it. The disciples grasp the essence of Jesus' teachings about the kingdom of God, but need to be led deeper in their understanding.

Those who reject Jesus' message experience what unbelievers experienced in the days of the prophet Isaiah. When Isaiah reflected on his calling to the prophetic ministry, he was painfully aware of Israel's resistance to his messages. He felt as if he had been called to blind people's eyes and to harden their hearts, so that they would not turn to God and be healed (Isa. 6:9,10). That painful experience of the prophet hundreds of years ago, was now being repeated in the experience of unbelieving Israel in the days of Jesus.

In this saying of Jesus (quoting the prophet Isaiah) we have a very serious and sobering observation. When the good news of the gospel is proclaimed and people reject it, their eyes are blinded and they become spiritually dull. Because they will not repent of

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their sins and receive forgiveness, their hearts become harder and harder.

It is not something God desires. He wants all people to repent and to be saved. But where his gracious offer is rejected, the word of God has a judgmental effect. Jesus used parables to cast light into the minds of his hearers, but when his message was rejected, the light became darkness.

**19. *If Jesus was crucified on Friday and rose on Sunday morning, can we still say that he was in the grave for three days and three nights?***

Speaking about his impending death, our Lord said that he would rise again "after three days" (Mk. 8:31). This confident claim on the part of Jesus must have been noised about, for even his enemies knew about it. Their accusation before Pilate was, that he had said, "After three days I will rise again" (Mt. 27:63).

In Matthew 16:21, as well as in Luke 9:22, Jesus is quoted as saying, that he will rise "on the third day" after his death. Paul also has this saying in this form in 1 Corinthians 15:4: "he was buried, and (that) he was raised on the third day." The church has confessed for many centuries that Christ "rose from the dead on the third day," as this saying is found in the Apostle's Creed.

One should not try to distinguish too sharply between these two forms in which this prediction of Jesus' resurrection is found. They mean essentially the same thing. William Lane writes in his commentary on Mark, "it is probable that Jesus' reference to three days was an indefinite expression for a short period of time." A rabbinic saying had it, that "the Holy One, blessed be he, does not leave his own in distress for more than three days." The numeral "three" was often used to indicate that something was complete or rounded off.

Matthew 12:40 is somewhat more problematic in this whole matter: "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth."

According to the Synoptic Gospel, Jesus was at the Last Supper on Thursday evening. In that same night he was apprehended and tried. Early Friday morning his enemies brought him before Pilate, charging him with political subversion. Pilate condemned him to death and his crucifixion was carried out that same day. Friday night and Saturday night he lay in the grave, and on the third day, Sunday, he arose from the dead. Since the Jews counted also part of days as days, the three days were Friday,

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Saturday and Sunday (using our modern words for the days of the week). There were, however, only two nights.

The Gospel of John has a slightly different chronology of the Passion week. Here Jesus is brought before Pilate in the morning (John 18:28), but the Jews did not enter the praetorium. They wanted to prevent their defilement, which would bar them from eating the Passover. But Passover was eaten on Thursday night. That puts the day of Jesus' crucifixion a day earlier from that of the Synoptic accounts. If we followed this chronology we would have three nights (Thursday, Friday and Saturday).

Most Bible scholars, however, follow the chronology of the Synoptic Gospels, according to which Jesus was crucified on Friday. The expression "after three days" must then be understood as idiomatic for a short period of time, somewhat like our "in a few days." In semitic languages "three" is sometimes used in the sense of "a few." The British New Testament scholar, F. F. Bruce, cautions us not to try to get precisely a 72-hour period of time out of the expression "three days and three nights."

Only once is the expression "in three days" found outside of our Gospels. As mentioned above, it is found in 1 Corinthians 15:4. What strikes us as strange is, that Paul claims that Christ was raised on the third day "according to the scriptures." Where do the Scriptures (i.e., the Old Testament) say that? Some think Paul was alluding to Hosea 6:2, "After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up that we may live before the Lord."

The prophet was not speaking of a bodily resurrection, but of a national revival. However, this passage was being applied in Judaism to the resurrection of the dead. Others think that Paul had Jonah 2:1 in mind when he spoke of Christ's resurrection on the third day. Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. But it is also possible that Paul spoke only of Christ's resurrection when he said that it was according to the Scriptures and that this did not include "on the third day." But one must still ask, where does the Old Testament predict Christ's resurrection? Peter, in his Pentecost sermon, applied Psalm 16:8-11 and Psalm 110:1 to Christ's resurrection. Perhaps when Isaiah spoke of the suffering servant who dies for the sins of his people he also had his



resurrection in mind when he said that "he will see his offspring, and shall prolong his days" (53:10).

Be that as it may, we can joyfully confess, "Death has been swallowed up in victory, Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?"

***20. How are we to understand Jesus' saying in Mark 9:1, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power?"***

Before we comment on this rather enigmatic saying of Jesus, we should clarify a few expressions in this verse. "To taste death" is an idiomatic expression for dying. "Taste" is used in the sense of "experience." "The kingdom of God" means God's reign over the lives of his subjects, his children who acknowledge him as King. Jesus' basic message was, that the kingdom of God was breaking into history by the coming of Jesus. The clear evidence of the inauguration of God's reign could be found in the words and the mighty deeds of Jesus. "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you" (Lk. 11:20).

However, Jesus' efforts to establish God's reign over the hearts and lives of people, met with stiff resistance. God's kingdom could not manifest itself as yet in all its fullness and power. In our passage (Mk. 9:1) Jesus expresses the hope that some of his contemporaries would yet experience a future manifestation of the kingdom of God with power. But what did Jesus mean when he spoke of this future manifestation of the reign of God with power?

1. One way of understanding this saying is: the kingdom of God was already breaking in with power, but there were those among Jesus' hearers who were not yet aware of this, had not yet comprehended it. Before their death, however, they would understand and bear witness to the coming of the kingdom in power. This was the view of C. H. Dodd, of Cambridge. The problem with this interpretation is, that Jesus seems to have a future coming of the kingdom in mind and not a future understanding.

2. This saying of Jesus is the prelude to the account of our Lord's transfiguration on the mountain (Mk. 9:2-13). From this context it is often inferred that the coming of the kingdom of God in power is to be understood as the transfiguration of our Lord. On this occasion three of the twelve disciples saw God's kingdom come in power, for the transfiguration was a kind of foretaste of the

resurrection and even the parousia, Christ's second coming, at the end of the age. This is the view of the British scholar, Cranfield, and others. However, it does seem somewhat strange, that Jesus would predict that some of his contemporaries would not die until they witnessed the coming of the kingdom with power, and then almost immediately goes up to the mountain to be transfigured (six days later, to be exact, Mk. 9:2).

3. A better suggestion is, that the coming of the kingdom with power is a reference to the resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Certainly Christ's resurrection was an overwhelming expression of divine power. Paul writes that Jesus was "declared to be Son of God with power . . . by resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4). And once the Holy Spirit would be poured out, said Jesus, his disciples would receive "power" to carry out their mission (Acts 1:8). Thousands were saved at the first Christian Pentecost. The Pentecost event was indeed a manifestation of the kingdom of God in power.

4. Another way of reading Mark 9:1 is as follows: The kingdom of God does not come by human efforts, or the force of arms, but rather, as can be seen in some of Jesus' parables, it comes slowly, secretly, without much fanfare. God's power is manifest in weakness. The kingdom comes step by step, sometimes quite slowly, but the final breakthrough will come with the resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of his Spirit. This interpretation is not unlike the previous, only that it puts the accent in a somewhat different place.

5. What complicates this saying is its parallel in Matthew 16:28, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." This follows upon Jesus' prediction that in the future the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father (Mt. 16:27). If these two verses are tied together then the coming of the Son of Man in his kingdom is a reference to Christ's parousia. Mark also speaks of the future coming of the Son of Man in the clouds with great power (Mk. 13:26). But how then could Jesus say that some of his contemporaries would not die until the return of Christ?

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Perhaps it is best to see in Christ's transfiguration, resurrection, and Pentecost a foretaste of the parousia. Some of his contemporaries would have a foretaste of God's kingdom coming in power; those of a later generation would witness the parousia, the climax of this whole series.

## **21. Why did Jesus curse the fig tree? (Mark 11:12-14)**

Cursing the fig tree was no doubt a symbolical act on the part of Jesus, and should be closely linked with the cleansing of the temple.

Jesus had entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey. Humbly and quietly he made his way among the cheering crowds, fully aware that he was on his way to his death. He entered the temple courts and "looked around at everything" (Mk. 11:11). Since it was late in the day, he went out to Bethany for the night with the twelve. The following day, when Jesus cleansed the temple, he spoke this word of condemnation: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations, but you have made it a den of robbers" (Mk. 11:17). In between the viewing of the activities in the temple and this word of judgment after he cleansed the temple, we have the account of the cursing of the fig tree.

As Jesus returned from Bethany with the twelve, he was hungry. Perhaps they had not eaten anything before leaving Bethany. It was perfectly legitimate for passerby to satisfy their hunger by picking fruit from trees or ears from a grain-field. We recall the occasion when Jesus and his disciples walked by a grain-field on a Sabbath and the disciples were criticized for plucking ears of grain on the Sabbath (but not for satisfying their hunger as such). So now, when Jesus saw a fig tree, he approached it with the intention (at least so it seemed) of plucking some of its fruit to satisfy his hunger.

The fig tree is not an evergreen. In November it sheds its leaves. In March it would begin to sprout new leaves. The blossoming of the fig tree was a clear sign that summer was around the corner (Mk. 13:28). This particular fig tree had leaves, but it did not yet have fresh fruit. Very likely some fig trees had fruit from the previous fall that had not yet fallen off (See Rev. 6:13). Some figs may not have fully matured before the leaves fell off. In any case, Jesus seems to have expected to find some figs on this tree.

However, when he found none, he spoke a word of

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judgment: "May no one ever eat fruit from you again" (Mk 11:14).

His disciples must have been puzzled by this spoken curse, and when they passed by this tree later, they saw that it was completely withered, and they wondered what all this meant. What, then, did Jesus want to say with this symbolical action?

Symbolical acts were well known in Israel's prophetic tradition. For example, Jeremiah is told to buy a linen loincloth and bury it in the cleft of a rock. Much later he is asked to retrieve it, and the prophet finds that it is ruined. Then the meaning is given: "Just so I will ruin the pride of Judah" (Jer. 13:8). Also, Jeremiah is asked to go to the potter and to watch him work at his wheel (Jer. 18:lff.). When a vessel he was making didn't turn out right he remade it. The message is: God is able to remake the broken vessel, Israel, if the people turn to God in repentance. On another occasion Jeremiah is told to make a yoke and wear it around his neck (Jer. 27), symbolizing the subjection of Israel and other nations to Babylon. Hananiah removed the yoke from Jeremiah and broke it, to symbolize that God would break Babylon's power (Jer. 28). But that turned out to be a lie.

There are many other examples of symbolic acts in the Old Testament. In Mark 11 Jesus curses the fig tree and then immediately goes to the temple to drive out the buyers and sellers of merchandise and the money changers. These two events are of one piece and were designed to proclaim that the temple had had its day and that God's judgment was about to strike an apostate people.

The prophet Jeremiah also had spoken against the dead formalism of temple worship in his day (Jer. 7:11). In fact Jesus quotes Jeremiah's word of judgment on the temple.

Jesus' action angered the Jewish hierarchy and they resolved to destroy Jesus. However, since the temple visitors were mesmerized by the teachings of Jesus, they had to plan his liquidation carefully.

The next day as Jesus and his disciples passed the fig tree, it was totally dried up and the disciples are stunned. "Rabbi, look!" they say (Mk. 11:21). Slowly the disciples were beginning to understand the meaning of the withering of the tree: Contemporary Judaism, with its hollow and perverse temple cult, was under divine

judgment because of the apostasy of the people and their rejection of God's Messiah.

This judgment was not immediately carried out. But forty years later, in A.D. 70, the Romans destroyed the city and the temple and made an end of the Jewish state. And what happened to the fig tree was foretaste of what was to come upon unbelieving Judaism.

For us the lesson is: formal religion without genuine devotion and obedience to God and his word has little value in the sight of God.

**22. *How are we to understand Jesus' prediction of the "desolating sacrilege" (Mark 13:14), which is to be the occasion for the flight of Jesus' followers from Judea?***

The expression "desolating sacrilege" or "the abomination of desolation," to give two possible translations, is found in Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11. The word "abomination" (*bdelugma*) refers to something detestable, abhorrent, offensive, stinking. It's a word used in the Septuagint for all that is connected with idolatry.

The word "desolation", when connected with "abomination" refers to the emptying of the holy place, the temple, because it has been so defiled, so desecrated. Both in Daniel, as well as in Mark (and Matthew), the reference is to the profaning and desecration of the Jerusalem temple, keeping the faithful from frequenting the temple, "emptying" it.

According to 1 Maccabees 1:45 and 6:7, Daniel's prediction of the desecration of the temple was fulfilled, to begin with, during the reign of the Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes (i.e., the manifest god), in the 2nd century before Christ. Antiochus was determined to stamp out the Jewish religion. He had a pig sacrificed on the altar in the temple, which was an abomination in the sight of the Jews. Also, he introduced pagan practices, including prostitution, in the Jerusalem temple. He erected an image of the Greek god, Zeus, and forced Jews, with the threat of death, to honor the image of this pagan god. (That this defiled temple was later cleansed and rededicated is a story that is irrelevant to our discussion here.)

When Jesus spoke of the "abomination of desolation" he had an event in mind that still lay in the future. Some interpreters have suggested that Jesus had the attempt of the Roman emperor, Gaius Caligula, in mind when he spoke of the coming abomination.

About 10 years after Jesus spoke these words (A.D. 41), Caligula ordered that his statue should be erected in the Jerusalem temple. He was, however, murdered before his order was carried out and thereby a bloodbath was averted. To place the emperor's image in the Jerusalem temple would have been such an abomination in the



eyes of the Jews that the temple would have been left desolate--emptied of worshipers.

More likely is the interpretation, that Jesus had the outbreak of the Jewish revolt against Rome in mind. It began in Galilee in A.D. 66 and led eventually to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Extremists in Palestine carried out all kinds of atrocities and blasphemous acts in the temple during the Roman siege. Rome sent one of its best generals, Vespasian, to subdue the Jewish revolt, but when he was declared emperor, his son Titus completed the destruction of Jerusalem with its temple. What Jesus had predicted, that not one stone would be left upon another, was now fulfilled (Mk. 13:1,2). The Jews were dispersed and had to practice their faith without a temple. Although today it is often rumored that there might be some interest in the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple, that is nowhere anticipated in the New Testament.

As Jesus anticipated the destruction of Jerusalem, together with its temple, he advised his followers to leave the city and to flee to the mountains (Mk. 13:14). Mountains were always considered good hiding places for refugees and those who were persecuted. Jesus is not at this point speaking about the end of this age, for when that day comes, the ungodly will try to hide themselves in the rocks and caves of the mountains, but it will do them no good (Rev. 6:15-17). No one can hide from the wrath of God and the Lamb on the last day. But in our Marcan passage, Jesus expresses his concern for his followers and encourages them to flee.

Eusebius, the third century church historian, reports that the church in Jerusalem did in fact take Jesus' prediction seriously, fled the city and settled on the other side of Jordan, in Pella.

Jesus foresaw the difficulties the church would have during the coming conflict and expresses his compassion for his people. He is concerned about pregnant mothers and about mothers who are nursing their babies. And so he encourages them to pray that their flight might not take place in winter. Winter in Palestine is the rainy season, roughly from October to March. Sudden rainstorms often lead the wadis to overflow, making it difficult to travel, not to mention the cold. Also, Jesus warns his disciples not

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be led astray by false Messiahs that arose from time to time.

The prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem with its temple then becomes what may be compared to a telescope through which Jesus looks at the end of the age when the Son of Man will come back on the clouds of heaven (Mk. 13:26). The apostle Paul evidently leaned on this prophecy of Jesus when he spoke of the coming of the Lawless One at the end of the age.

**23. How are we to understand Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane: "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible: remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want" (Mark 14:36)?**

After eating the Last Supper in the upper room in Jerusalem, Jesus and his disciples crossed the Kidron Valley, east of the city, and came to the Garden of Gethsemane. It was understood that Passover night was to be spent in Jerusalem. Judas had left the table earlier but he knew the place where Jesus could be found and before long he would appear at the head of an armed band to take Jesus captive. Jesus knew that his hour had come--the hour of his death, the hour of this world's salvation.

Once they had reached the spot where they were going to spend the night, Jesus left his disciples behind and began to wrestle in prayer to God, his Father. He falls to the ground repeatedly. Luke adds that his sweat fell like drops of blood to the ground, and that an angel came to strengthen him. The agony of Gethsemane was a foretaste of the suffering that awaited Jesus when he was tormented and crucified. His prayer in Gethsemane anticipated his cry of dereliction on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me."

Deeply distressed, Jesus prays to God, his Father, while the disciples sleep, and asks him whether there is no other way than to drink the bitter cup of suffering and death. That strikes us as somewhat strange, when throughout his ministry he knew that death at the hands of sinners was his destiny. In his predictions of his passion he made it explicitly plain to his disciples that he must undergo suffering, be killed, and then rise again (Mk. 9:31). Why then did he now waver, when his hour had finally come?

In Israel's history men of God had repeatedly implored God to change his plans. For example, Moses asked God to change his mind regarding the destruction of idolatrous Israel (Ex. 32). Hezekiah had begged God to lengthen his life, after God had let him know that he was about to die (2 Kgs. 20). A request made to God, asking him to change his plans, was not considered unusual or dishonoring to God. Jesus' prayer should not be seen as a protest

against God's plan. He has an intimate and loving relationship with his Father, whom he addresses as a child would address his or her earthly Father (*abba*).

Jesus' petition that the Father should remove the cup from him, was made three times. That indicates that this was a very serious matter for our Lord and that it weighed so heavily upon him. "I am deeply grieved, even to death," he said (Mt. 26:38). The number three sometimes expresses totality or finality. Satan tempted Jesus three times, i.e., in every possible way. Peter denied his Lord three times, i.e., completely. Here Jesus cries to God three times.

But the request to remove the cup was not in line with the Father's will and plan. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son (John 3:16). He did not spare his Son but gave him up for us all (Rom. 8:32). When Jesus realized that his death was in the Father's eternal plan, he humbly accepted God's will and steadfastly went to the cross in obedience to his Father.

Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane can be understood only if one takes his humanity seriously. He had claimed earlier, that his food was to do the will of the Father (John 4:34). However, as he faced a death by which he was to atone for the sins of the world, he trembled. The prospect of bearing our sins in his body to the tree, as Peter puts it, was so overwhelming that it nearly crushed him. Mark says "he was distressed and agitated" (14:34).

We should, however, not overlook the victorious note in this heart-wrenching experience: "Not my will but yours be done." This prayer of submission to the Father's plan has become a model for believers throughout the ages, when requests made repeatedly to God were seemingly left unanswered. One can, of course, say "your will be done" with quite diverse attitudes. It may be a very unwilling confession, and can even be spoken in anger. In Islamic countries, Muslims constantly say "if God wills." Jesus spoke these words of submission with full confidence that his Father loved him and that he would see him through the coming ordeal.

Jesus' commitment to do the will of God, in the Garden of Gethsemane, reminds us of another garden, mentioned at the beginning of human history. When Adam and Eve sinned in the

Garden of Eden and brought humankind down into sin with them, they said in effect, "Not your, but my will be done." The last Adam, Christ, said "not my will, but yours be done," and thereby made it possible for fallen humanity to come back to God.

Having yielded to the Father's will, Jesus no longer hesitated to walk the path that led him to his death and to our salvation.

**24. What does the expression "Abba, Father" mean? Are we to address God in this way? (Mark 14:36)**

The word Abba is the Aramaic word for "father." The New Testament was originally written in Greek and so the writers translate the Aramaic Abba for their Greek readers, since they would not be familiar with it. For Semitic readers the translation of Abba into Greek (*pater*, i.e., father) would have been unnecessary or even redundant, because it meant "father, father."

If we could transport ourselves back 2000 years and could spend a day in the home of Joseph and Mary, the parents of Jesus, we might hear the words Abba and Imma (Papa and Mama) repeatedly from the mouth of Jesus and his siblings.

The Evangelists have retained the Aramaic Abba only in one passage in the Gospels, and that is Mark 14:36. (It is found twice in Paul, Gal 4:6 and Rom 8:15.) But since Aramaic was spoken in everyday life in Palestine in Jesus' day, Abba is the word he would have used whenever he addressed his Father, both in his private as well as his public prayers.

For Jewish hearers it may have come as a surprise or even a shock to hear Jesus address his Father in such an intimate way, "God is in heaven and you are on the earth," said the rabbis, and that meant one should be careful to show the necessary reverence for God by addressing him less intimately. God was so holy, it was said, that even the sacred name Yahweh should not be used too often. When the Scriptures were read in the synagogue Adonay was to be substituted for Yahweh. When copying the Old Testament books, scribes were instructed to use a different pen when the name Yahweh occurred.

In Jewish prayers, that have come down to us from the time of Christ, Abba is not used in addressing God. That doesn't mean, however, that God was not known as Father. But in the Old Testament God is Father in the sense of Creator. "Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us?" (Mal. 2:10).

Not only is God the creator of humankind, he is also the Father of Israel in a unique sense, for he chose Israel to be his son.

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (Hos. 11:1). But none of the saints of the Old Testament in their writings ever address God as Father.

At the time of Jesus Jews showed their reverence for God by using substitutes, surrogates for his name. Instead of "God" they often used "heaven" as a substitute. (That explains why Matthew, with Jewish readers in mind, speaks of the kingdom of heaven instead of the kingdom of God.) Sometimes they used the word "power" instead of God. In fact in our chapter Jesus is quoted as saying before the Sanhedrin, "You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power" (Mk. 14:62). Or God may be called "the Highest" (Lk. 1:32). Sometimes Jesus used these surrogates as well, just as his fellow countrymen would. It must have struck Jesus' contemporaries when he addressed God as his Abba.

It is interesting that the Greek text of the Gospels has retained Abba only in Mark 14:36, for this happens to be in his prayer in one of the darkest hours of his life, in Gethsemane. As he agonized over drinking the bitter cup that he was being asked to drink, including the impending crucifixion and the atonement for the sins of the world, he cried out to his Father: "Abba, for you all things are possible" remove this cup from me; but not what I want, but what you want."

Earlier his disciples had come to him on one occasion and asked him to teach them to pray. In response Jesus said, "When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be your name' (Lk. 11:1,2). Since he and his disciples spoke Aramaic we can be sure that the word for Father, which he used, was Abba.

By God's saving grace we have become members of the family of God and are now permitted to address God as our Father.

This does not mean that we show God less respect than Jews did when they used substitutes for God's holy name, for right beside the word "Father" we have the petition, "Hallowed be your name."

Clearly, then, we should avoid all disrespectful manners when we approach God. Intimacy and reverence are not mutually exclusive. Since Abba was the word children in those days used to address their earthly father, it has often been suggested that we

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might speak to God as Papa or Daddy. However, I would caution against the use of these words of endearment. Although well-intended, the result is bathos.

That God invites us to come to him as children to their father and make our petitions known, is a marvelous privilege given to us by grace.



**25. Did God the Father actually forsake his Son when he died on the cross? (Mark 15:34)**

Both Mark and Matthew report that at the ninth hour of the day (i.e., three o'clock in the afternoon) Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

In both Gospels this cry of dereliction is given in its Semitic original with a Greek translation for the benefit of Greek-speaking readers. What is not altogether clear is whether Jesus cried out in his mother tongue, Aramaic, or whether he was quoting a word from the Psalms in Hebrew. Mark has "*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani,*" whereas Matthew has "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani*" (Mt. 27:46). Since some of the onlookers thought he was calling Elijah, it is more likely that he spoke in Hebrew, for Eli is closer to Elias (Elijah).

Be that as it may, Jesus was quoting the first verse of Psalm 22. Some scholars have suggested that Jesus recited the entire Psalm, but that the Gospel writers give us only the first verse. That is a distinct possibility, but cannot be stated with certainty. The Psalm ends on a very confident note. Among other things it is said, that the "ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations" (Ps. 22:27,28). Psalm 22 not only expresses the suffering Psalmist's forsakenness, but also his confidence that in the end all will be well. This may have been of great comfort to Jesus on the cross.

It is possible that the writer of the book of Hebrews had Psalm 22 in mind, when he said of Jesus, "in the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission" (Heb. 5:7).

How are we to understand Jesus' words of dereliction?

(a) Some Bible readers have read it as a cry of hopelessness. Jesus, so it is said, had hoped right up to the last, that the Father would send an angel to rescue him from death. At least he had

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trusted in the comforting presence of the Father as he hung on the cross in his agony. But no help arrived, God had in fact forsaken him; Jesus had given up all hope of deliverance. Those who hold this view usually add, however, that Jesus had erred in his interpretation; God had actually not forsaken him. However, it is hard to harmonize this view with what else we know about Jesus' death.

(b) Another view is, that the cry of dereliction is simply a confession on the part of Jesus that he "felt" forsaken. He knew that God would never forsake him, but he felt that way. "Why have you forsaken me?" would then mean "Why have you brought me to the point where I feel forsaken?" Instead of addressing him as Father he says "My God," as if there was distance between him and God. He felt abandoned by God. But again we must ask: Had God really forsaken his Son, or did Jesus simply feel forsaken?

(c) Still others think that Jesus actually quoted the entire Psalm and although the Psalm begins with a cry of dereliction, it ends on a triumphant note, and that's where we should put the emphases: it was a cry of victory and vindication. However, in that case, we might have expected a quotation from the conclusion of the Psalm rather than from the beginning.

(d) It is best, so it seems, that we should take Jesus' cry of dereliction quite realistically. Earlier he had told his disciples, "Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me" (John 16:32), but now he had to admit that the Father had forsaken him. When one considers that Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, that he bore the penalty for our sins, eternal separation from God, then the cry of dereliction does not sound so strange. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:19), and that meant tasting death for every human being. In the words of the writer of the book of Hebrews, "but we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" (Heb. 2:9).

God the Father heard his cry and responded by raising him from the dead. And today he is highly exalted at the right hand of the Father.

In the past, people have often faced death bravely, without flinching. Jesus trembled and cried out to God. What is forgotten when such comparisons are made is that Jesus died for the sins of the world-- something no one else could ever do. He was forsaken when he died, so that you and I might never be forsaken by God our Father.

***26. According to Luke 1:34, Mary, the mother of Jesus was a virgin when she conceived our Lord. How significant is it for us today to hold to the virgin birth of Christ?***

In the Apostles' Creed, which has come to us from the early centuries of Christianity, the church confesses, "Born of the virgin Mary." That confession has been challenged repeatedly since the days of the Enlightenment in the 18th century. When the famous German theologian, Adolf von Harnack, at the turn of the last century, confessed that he could no longer say the words "born of the virgin Mary" with good conscience, Evangelicals protested. They considered such skepticism to be an attack on the clear teaching of the New Testament. Where do we stand today?

Perhaps it should be pointed out, to begin with, that the New Testament mentions the virginal conception of Jesus by Mary in only two passages (Luke 1:34 and Matthew 1:18). Jesus' conception is attributed to the Holy Spirit. He was, of course, born like all other children are born. It is, therefore, not quite correct to speak of a virgin "birth"; we really mean the virginal conception of Jesus. However, since the expression "virgin birth" has become part of our theological vocabulary we may continue to use it, as long as we understand that it is Jesus' conception that is meant.

When the angel brought Mary the news that she should give birth to Jesus, she was puzzled because, as Luke 1:34 has it, "she knew no man." The angel then explains that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and she will bear a child that will be called the Son of God (Lk. 1:35).

In the Mariology of the Roman Catholic Church it has at times been taught that Mary remained a virgin even after she gave birth to Jesus and after she and Joseph came together. From this it was then inferred, that Jesus' brothers and sisters were not the children of Mary but, perhaps, cousins of Jesus. But the Gospels know nothing of the perpetual virginity of Mary.

Why the virgin birth of Jesus is not mentioned in the New Testament outside of Matthew and Luke is not clear. Mark has no infancy stories at all in his Gospel, and John is also silent on the

subject of the virgin birth. That it is nowhere mentioned in the writings of Paul may suggest that it was not a doctrine that was contested in the first century.

Some critics have suggested that Matthew and Luke got the notion of Christ's virgin birth from the Old Testament. We do have stories of miraculous births in the Old Testament, such as the birth of Isaac, who was born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. But these were not virgin births. Others have suggested that Matthew and Luke simply took Isaiah 7:14 and applied this prophetic word, spoken to Ahaz, to the birth of Jesus.

In Judaism Messiah's birth was not thought of as a virgin birth, and when Christians claimed that Jesus had been virginally conceived, they ran into stiff resistance from their Jewish opponents. Some rabbis even suggested that Mary had given birth to an illegitimate child. When they called Jesus "son of Mary" (Mk. 6:31), they were probably intimating that he was fathered by some unknown man.

Rationalists have always had trouble with the doctrine of the virgin birth as well as with the incarnation as such. That God became man did not fit into their understanding of the laws of this universe. However, if we want to be true to the Scriptures, we have no choice but to confess that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary.

To confess one's faith in the virgin birth of our Lord does not mean, however, that we can explain this miracle. It will always remain a mystery to us as long as we are in the body. But that doesn't make it any less true.

The doctrine of the virgin birth proclaims that God and not man brought the Savior into this world. He did not have a human father. It was, then, an expression of the wondrous grace of God, and we say with Paul, "Thanks be unto God for his indescribable gift" (2 Cor. 9:15).

The virgin birth of Christ puts the emphasis on the uniqueness of our Lord. God could have brought the Messiah into the world through the ordinary course of nature, but in his infinite wisdom and power, he gave us the Christ child through a human mother without the help of a human father. Jesus was fully human, although not "only" human. He was also divine. And because he is

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both human and divine, he is able to bring sinful humanity back to God.

Although the virgin birth is a miracle, we should not underestimate the important role that Mary played in bringing the Messiah into this world. Mary too needed a Savior, like the rest of us, and we don't want to worship her. But in the history of salvation she will always have a unique place.

**27. Why is there such a discrepancy in the translation of Luke 2:14?**

The older English versions, such as the King James, have the angels say, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." The New International Version has it in this form: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom God's favor rests." (Most modern versions have the NIV rendering in essence, if not in the exact wording.)

Why the difference? It is not a matter of translation or of interpretation; it has to do with a manuscript discrepancy. The King James Version was based on what is known as the Byzantine Text, first printed by Erasmus in 1516. Since then much older and better manuscripts and ancient versions have been discovered. The difference in the Greek manuscripts seems minuscule but it makes a big difference in translation. The Byzantine text has the word "good will" or "favor" in the nominative (*eudokia*), the Alexandrian and Western families of manuscripts, as these are called, have the genitive (*eudokias*). The difference is one "s", but it changes the translation completely. How the reading *eudokia* emerged from the original *eudokias* is not quite certain, but the final "s" may simply have been overlooked by a copyist. On the other hand, since the original *eudokias* is the harder reading grammatically, it may be that some later scribe dropped the "s" to make the reading easier.

If read as a nominative, the angels proclaim peace on earth and good will (or favor) toward men (literally: "among" men--men here includes women; it refers to humankind). If we read it as a genitive then the message is: peace on earth, among men of his good pleasure, of his favor, of his good will. The Good News Bible has "to those with whom he is pleased"; the New Revised Standard has "among those whom he favors."

Prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls it was sometimes argued that "men of (God's) good pleasure" was so unusual that, even though the better manuscripts had this, it couldn't possibly be the correct reading. Now, however, this unusual expression has turned up in Hebrew in several Qumran

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Hymns, and should therefore be regarded as a genuine Semitic construction. To be sure, Luke wrote in good Hellenistic Greek, but he drew upon Semitic sources for his birth narratives.

If then we go back to what is now generally held to be the original reading in the Greek text, the passage has little to do with an exhortation to show "good will to men." It is rather a promise of peace to people living on this earth who are the objects of God's good will, favor, pleasure, as seen in the coming of the Savior.

Since that seems quite clearly to be the meaning, we should do an overview of the passage as a whole. The angelic hymn begins with a doxology: "Glory to God in the highest." The "highest" is a reference to heaven where God lives. This stands in parallel construction to "peace on earth" where humankind lives. The word "earth" seems very impersonal but it probably has a meaning similar to "world", as in John 3:16, where it refers to human beings living on this earth.

Every time Advent comes round, one hears it said from some pulpits, that the angels sang about peace on earth. But in the two millennia since Christ's birth, human history has been blotted by strife and war and genocide. To this it should be said, that Jesus predicted that there would be wars throughout human history up to the end of the age (Mk. 13:8). The apocalyptic riders, which John saw in a vision (Rev. 6), take away peace from this earth. Jesus also said, that he had not come to bring peace on earth, but a sword (Mt. 10:34), meaning that loyalty to Jesus would often lead to conflict between family members.

Perhaps, then, we should ask ourselves, whether we have understood the word "peace" correctly. The Greek word for peace (*eirene*) may mean the opposite of strife and war, but behind it lies the Semitic *shalom*, which has a fuller meaning: health, wellness, wholeness, salvation. What the angels promised was not that human history would be free of conflict, but rather that God's peace, God's salvation was being offered to people living on this earth through the coming of Christ.

Because God so loved the world, he sent his only Son to this earth, where humankind lives, with the purpose of bringing *shalom*, salvation to people upon whom God's favor rests, people



with whom God is pleased. We are "people of his pleasure." Instead of condemning us forever to eternal ruin and separation from God, he took pleasure in offering us salvation, the peace that comes from the forgiveness of sins. That is so overwhelming that we gladly join the angels in their doxology: Glory to God in the highest.

**28. What did Jesus mean when he spoke of the greatness of John the Baptist and then added, "Yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he" (Luke 7:28)?**

John the Baptist was suffering in prison because of his courageous witness, when Jesus eulogized his forerunner (Lk. 7:24-27). John had prepared the way for the greater One. He called himself a friend of the Bridegroom who rejoices when he hears the bridegroom's voice (John 3:29). Without any feelings of envy he saw his disciples slowly going over to Jesus. He had been faithful to his calling and Jesus has high words of praise for John's prophetic ministry.

As he lay in prison John was plagued by doubts, as to whether Jesus was in fact the greater One, whose coming he had announced. Perhaps the reason he had suddenly had doubts was, that Jesus did not seem to carry out his mission as John had envisioned it. The Baptist had predicted that when the greater One came, he would gather his wheat into the granary and would burn the chaff (Mt. 3:12). Jesus, however, associated with sinners and looked for the lost and offered them forgiveness and a new life. There was no indication of judgment on sinners,

And so John sent messengers to Jesus, asking "are you the one that is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Lk. 7:19). Jesus might have responded with "Yes, I am the One who was to come." But perhaps that kind of answer would not have dispelled John's doubts. Instead he sends word to John saying, "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them" (Lk. 7:22). This was precisely what Old Testament prophets had anticipated (Isa. 35:5,6). Clearly, then, Jesus was the Messiah.

When John's messengers had left, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John. He was not a reed shaken by the wind; he was not dressed in soft robes; he did not live in luxury. He was a prophet; indeed, more than a prophet.

Generally it was thought in Jesus' day that the voice of prophecy had ceased, that the most one could expect was a *bath qol*

(a whisper of a voice). But John had been called by God to a prophetic ministry, called to inaugurate, as it were, the dawn of the messianic age.

But John was not only a prophet; he was more than a prophet (Lk 7:26). He had the unique calling to prepare the way for Messiah. He stood at the turning point of the ages; the old age was coming to an end and the new age was about to begin. No prophet had had the privilege that John had, of opening the door for the Messiah. For that reason Jesus could say, "among those born of women no one is greater than John" (John 7:28). The Semitic expression "born of women" means simply that John was a human being, a man, not an angel or some superman. Among mortals John was the greatest, for no one else has had the unique privilege of introducing the greater One, the Messiah, to the world.

And then Jesus added this rather puzzling word, "yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he" (Lk. 7:28). This saying obviously does not apply to Jesus who is, of course, greater than John. The reference is to a member of the kingdom of God, which Jesus came to establish. Jesus' comment should not be understood to mean that the humbler a person is the greater he or she is. Nor does it mean that the person who is humbler than John is greater than he.

The meaning seems to be, that even though John is the greatest among the prophets, he lived prior to the coming of the greater One. He belongs to the age of preparation, the age of waiting. By contrast, those who belong to the kingdom, which Jesus has established, belong to the age of fulfillment, the new age.

And regardless of how insignificant they might be, the very fact that they are in the kingdom of God, in the new age, the messianic age, means that they are more privileged than John. John stands, as it were, in the vestibule, the foyer of the kingdom, we, who live on this side of the divide, are in the house. Everyone who hears Jesus' message about the inbreaking of the kingdom and accept God's reign over his or her life, is more privileged than John.

If that is the current meaning, then the disciples of Jesus, for example, were greater than John, the forerunner. Even the most insignificant of Jesus' followers enjoy the blessings of the new age,

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the age of salvation. John, like Moses of old, saw the promised land from a distance, but remained on the other side of its border. (We are not suggesting, of course, that John will not be in God's eternal kingdom. He most certainly will.) But he stood on the doorstep, we have inherited all the blessings of the kingdom of God.

**29. *What is the meaning of Jesus' words concerning his "generation" in Luke 7:31-35?***

Jesus had just commented on the significance of John the Baptist in the history of salvation. A great many people responded to John's message and were baptized, signifying that they wanted to begin a new life in the messianic community that was emerging. However, the Jewish hierarchy resisted John's call to repentance. With this as a background, Jesus asks the rhetorical question, "To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like?" (Lk. 7:31).

The people of "this generation" are Jesus' contemporaries who ignored the spiritual movement begun by the ministry of John. This designation of unbelieving Israel was well-known from the Old Testament. In Psalm 95:10 God says, "for forty years I loathed that generation." God speaks to Israel through the prophet Jeremiah, "the Lord has rejected and forsaken the generation that provoked his wrath" (Jer. 7:29). There are many other references to "this generation" in the Old Testament.

When the church was born on the day of Pentecost, and people wondered how they should respond to the message proclaimed by the apostles, Peter exhorted them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation" (Acts 2:40). The expression "this generation" is often used in a pejorative sense of fellow-Jews who rejected God's offer of salvation.

After asking the question, to whom this generation could be compared, Jesus answers: "They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep'" (Lk. 7:31). Jesus compares his unbelieving generation with children who just cannot be pleased, regardless of how hard one tries.

We might imagine village children asking their friends whether they would like to dance. They play the flute in the hope that their playmates will respond and join in. But no, instead of joining the others in the fun, they pout. They don't want to play, don't want to dance. Well, then, why not play funeral? All

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children tend to imitate their elders when they play games, and in a primitive village, weddings, dances, funerals, and other family events would be imitated. "We wailed, and you did not weep," is a reference to funerals at which people expressed their grief in weeping and wailing. But these children find no takers for this more somber sort of game either. So, whether it was weddings or funerals, these children could not get their village friends to join in. Suggest what they might, their friends simply would not play with them.

There follows then the application: "For John the Baptist came, eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon', the Son of Man has come, eating and drinking, and you say 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners'" (Lk. 7:33,34).

John the Baptist lived a rather ascetic life. He ate grasshoppers and wild honey (Mk. 1:6) and did not drink wine (Lk. 1:15). John called Israel to repentance in anticipation of the greater One who would baptize, not only with water, but with the Holy Spirit. Ascetics were normally held in high regard and were thought of as holy people. But in spite of John's self-denial, his message was pushed aside by many in his generation. In the end John lost his life because of his witness and his call to righteous living.

After the forerunner had completed his ministry, Jesus came upon the scene. His message was in harmony with that of John, only that in Christ the kingdom of God was actually breaking into this world. Jesus followed a somewhat different lifestyle. He participated in festivals, he accepted invitations to people's homes, and he took part in the life of the Jewish community. But the response to Jesus' message was no different--many rejected it. They criticized Jesus and maligned him because of his compassion for sinners. They called him a "glutton and a drunkard." Instead of rejoicing that God's kingdom was dawning and accepting God's reign over their lives, they rejected Jesus, just as they had rejected John. In other words, like village children who pouted, Jesus' contemporaries would not "play."

The passage ends with a rather obscure saying of Jesus:

"Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children" (Lk. 7:35).

The children of wisdom are those who respond positively to the message of John as well as that of Jesus. They don't criticize the messenger, but give heed to God's call to enter his kingdom and become members of the messianic community. They are baptized with water and anticipate the baptism with the Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

**30. *Jesus cast out demons (Luke 11:14-23). How should we view exorcism today?***

Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil. He is the stronger One who breaks into the house of the strong man, Satan; he binds him and robs him of his goods, i.e., he sets people, in bondage to the evil one, free. That Satan would declare war against Jesus, was to be expected. Jesus' messianic mission was, as it were, a raid on Satan's kingdom. Throughout our Lord's ministry, beginning with his temptation in the wilderness, the devil dogged his steps but, in the end, the evil one lost the battle.

The exorcism of demons was part of our Lord's strategy to overcome the devil. Sometimes they are called "evil" or "unclean" spirits. Demons are members of Satan's forces, which are bent on destroying God's kingdom, and so when our Lord cast out demons, he was signaling the demise of Satan's rule.

That demons often attacked human beings, was common knowledge among Jews at the time of Jesus. Evil spirits moved freely in the air as well as on the ground. Some of their favorite dwellings were ancient ruins, the wilderness, or graves. Demons, it was thought, had great power. They not only caused sickness and madness, but even death. One of their main purposes was to tempt people to commit sinful deeds. Jewish rabbis suggested that one could protect oneself against demons by obeying the Ten Commandments, wearing amulets, and entrusting oneself to the help of angels.

The belief in the presence and power of demons at the time of Jesus was very strong. Evidence for this has been found by examining the skulls in some ancient grave-sites. Many skulls have tiny holes in them, suggesting the practice of trepanning. By boring a hole into a sick person's skull it was hoped that the demon would escape and the person would be healed. In one grave-site, unearthed in Palestine, 120 skulls were found, of which 26 had been trepanned.

Exorcism was not an unknown practice in Judaism. When Jesus was accused of driving out demons by Beelzebub, he asked



his opponents, by whom their exorcists drove out demons (Lk. 11:19). There is an interesting account in the book of Acts of the sons of *Skeva* who evidently were successful exorcists and who wanted to use the powerful name of Jesus to further their trade. However, this attempt backfired and they were put to shame (Acts 19:13-16).

Let us see how Jesus dealt with these evil agents of the devil: (1) Jesus did not seek out the demon possessed, He cast out demons when those who were possessed by evil spirits were brought to him. (2) Jesus cast out demons simply by a word of command. That was rather different from Jewish practice, where all kinds of methods were used to exorcize the demon. Jesus simply "rebuked" the demons and commanded them to leave (Mk. 9:25). (3) He even forbade them to speak (Mk. 1:34). Jesus drove out demons by the power of the Holy Spirit (Mt. 12:28). In the Lucan parallel (11:20), Jesus claimed to overcome the demons with "the finger" of God, i.e., God's power. (5) Upon occasion Jesus even cast out a demon from a distance. For example, the Canaanite woman discovered, when she came home, that her daughter who had a demon, was healed (Mk. 7:30). Satan and his hangerson were totally defeated when our Lord rose from the dead, and it is only a matter of time before this victory will be fully realized.

Meanwhile Satan knows that he has little time left, and to this day his forces are locked in conflict with God and his followers. Those who have been brought up in a world where science rules supreme, find the Gospel accounts of exorcism hard to swallow. The many evils in our society are more readily attributed to poverty and ignorance, rather than to the work of the devil. And, to be sure, we should not attribute all evils to Satan. However, to relegate the whole subject of demonology to the realm of superstition, would be a grave error.

It will not do, either, to say that Jesus simply adapted himself to the superstitious beliefs of the Jewish people in his day. What is even worse is to accuse Jesus of not knowing better than his contemporaries. Such limited understanding, it is then said, was simply part of his being human.

No, we have to take the reality of Satan and demons

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seriously. To view demons as a leftover of medieval superstition, not only violates the teachings of the Scriptures, but also exposes us to attacks by the evil one. But God's people do not need to be afraid, for the "one who was born of God protects them, and the evil one does not touch them" (1 Jo. 5:18).

**31. What did Jesus mean when he spoke of a coming baptism that distressed him? (Luke 12:50)**

Only Luke reports this saying of Jesus: "I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed." Biblical scholars generally connect this verse with the preceding word of Jesus: "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled" (Lk. 12:49). Although the connection between these two sayings is not so obvious, there is a connection that needs to be noted. But let us take the coming baptism of our Lord first.

Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem where he will lay down his life for the salvation of all humankind. Prior to his triumphal entry into the city, according to Mark 10:35-44, James and John asked for the privilege of sitting at the right and left of our Lord's glory. Jesus responded by speaking of his coming baptism, which they thought they would be able to endure. This baptism (which our Lord was to undergo) stands as a parallel to drinking the cup (Mk. 10:38). Clearly our Lord had his Passion in mind when he spoke of drinking the cup and of his coming baptism.

The word "baptism" is found both in its literal as well as its figurative sense in the NT. There is the baptism with water, but there is also the baptism with fire and the baptism with the holy Spirit. Paul even speaks of Israel's baptism into Moses in the cloud and in the sea (I Cor. 10:2). And so it shouldn't surprise us to find Jesus using baptism as a figure of speech for his death.

On the other hand, when Jesus spoke of his death as a baptism, we are reminded also of his baptism with water at the beginning of his ministry. Our Lord received baptism at the hands of John the Baptist. John baptized those who repented of their sins and joined the messianic community that awaited the greater One who would baptize not only with water but also with the holy Spirit. Jesus had no sins to confess, and John was hesitant to baptize him (Mt. 3:15). But Jesus wanted to identify with those who were turning from their sins to begin a new life.

When he was baptized in the Jordan the holy Spirit came

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down upon him, equipping him for his messianic mission, and the voice of the Father added his approval to the path that his Son would take--a path that would take him to the cross. His baptism in the muddy waters of Jordan anticipated what Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). His water baptism was, as it were, his first major step on the road to Calvary, where he would be baptized with his death.

The apostle John wrote later that Christ had come with water and blood (I John 5:6). Some think this is a reference to the water and blood that flowed from the wounded side of Jesus (John 19:34), but it is best to understand this saying to refer to his baptism with water and his baptism with death (blood). This double baptism of Jesus embraces his entire ministry.

But how are we to understand Jesus' saying that he is distressed until the coming baptism is completed? Perhaps in the same way as the painful trauma he experienced in Gethsemane. As he wrestled with the question of his impending crucifixion, the profound depths of his humanity are opened up for us. It was the Father's will that he should die for the sins of the world. And he will be obedient unto death on the cross. No young person at 33 years of age is happy to die. Jesus is not a stoic, who is indifferent to pain and suffering. He knows the cup he must drink will be bitter. Although he was fully divine, he was also fully human. As he faced the agony of death, expressed so poignantly in his cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," our Lord shuddered. He was distressed as he thought of this coming baptism of death.

But how is this coming baptism related to the casting of fire on earth? Fire is used metaphorically in a variety of ways in the Scriptures. It can symbolize judgment, purification, holiness, and the presence of God or his holy Spirit. When John the Baptist predicted that the greater One would baptize with the holy Spirit and fire (Mt. 3:16 and para), the baptism with the Spirit referred to Pentecost (Acts 1:5), and the baptism with fire to the coming judgment. But when Jesus said that he had come to bring fire to the earth, he probably had both the Pentecostal fire (i.e., the

outpouring of the Spirit) and the judging, refining process, that leads to a new people of God in mind (although it is possible that he thought of bearing God's judgment for our sins). In any case, Jesus wished the fire were already kindled. But that was not possible until our Lord was baptized with his death.

**32. *How are we to understand Jesus' demand that we are to "hate" our relatives and even our own life if we want to be his disciples? (Luke 14:26)***

In his sermon on the cost of discipleship, Jesus said: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." Matthew has this saying in a slightly different form: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Mt. 10:37). Matthew does not use the word "hate" but John in his Gospel does: "Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (Jo. 12:25).

When Jesus spoke of hating one's relatives or even one's life, he was using well-known Semitic idioms, which tend to grate somewhat on our western ears. Perhaps a few illustrations might help us to understand the meaning of the expression "to hate." It was said, for example, of Jacob, that he loved Rachel but "hated" Lea (Gen. 29:31-32). Clearly here the words "love" and "hate" are used to make a comparison. Jacob loved Rachel more than Lea. That God chose Israel and not Edom is expressed in this way: "I have loved Jacob) but I have hated Esau" (Mal. 1:2-3; Rom. 9:13). This doesn't mean that God actually hated the Edomites, for he wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. But in his divine sovereignty he chose Israel to be his agent in carrying out his salvation purposes in history.

Jesus used the same idiom when he warned against the worship of mammon: "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Mt. 6:24). Jesus is not discussing the question of whether someone can or cannot work for two masters. Nor is he saying that if one does, one master will always be loved and the other hated. But he is saying that when someone tries to serve two masters, one inevitably prefers one to the other. And that's also the problem

with setting our affections on mammon. We cannot love God and mammon equally at the same time, and so we have to make a choice.

The Hebrew writers tend to see everything in black and white. Also, they are masters in the use of hyperbolic language. What is more important in a person's life is what he or she loves, and what is less important is what he or she hates. To prefer one thing over another is to love the one and hate the other. It is with this in mind that we must read Jesus' saying about hating father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even one's own life. It is clear from other sayings of Jesus that he did not use the word "hate" in the literal sense in which we tend to use it. For example, he criticized the Pharisees and Sadducees severely for undermining God's commandment, "Honor your father and your mother" (Ex. 20:12), by devoting property, which was to provide parents with a livelihood, to the temple treasury (Mk. 7:10). Parents were to be loved, honored, supported and not hated. The apostle John gives us a beautiful picture of how a son ought to care for his mother, when, in his dying hour, he instructed his disciple to take care of his own mother. Mothers were to be loved, not hated. And Paul also teaches believers to love the members of their immediate family: "Whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (I Tim. 5:8).

Jesus' word about hating loved ones and one's own life finds its background in Deuteronomy 33:9, where the tribe of Levi is blessed because of the position it took after Israel had worshiped the golden calf: "Who said of his father and mother, I regard them not; he ignored his kin, and did not acknowledge his children. For they observed your word, and kept your covenant."

Jesus wanted to teach his followers that he and his kingdom must take first place in their lives, if they wanted to be his disciples. It often happens that people have to make a choice between relatives who are unbelievers and Jesus. And even when someone has Christian relatives, they can stand in the way of a person's calling to serve God. Jesus promises those who leave houses and brother or sisters or mother or father or children or

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fields, for his sake and for the sake of the gospel "a hundredfold now in this age-houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecution--and in the age to come eternal life" (Mk. 10:29-30).

Following Jesus means that family relations take a secondary place in our lives. Jesus uses Semitic vocabulary to teach us, that discipleship means that we put God's kingdom in first place in our lives. All aspects of our lives must be integrated into this overarching treasure: God's kingdom.



***33. What did Jesus mean when he encouraged his followers to make friends with the mammon of unrighteousness? (Luke 16:9)***

Jesus' words, "And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of the mammon of unrighteousness, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes," are the application of the Parable of the Dishonest Manager (Lk. 16:1-9). To grasp the significance of the application, we should refresh our memory of the parable.

A wealthy landowner had appointed a steward, i.e., a manager, and had entrusted him with his land holdings. The landowner lives elsewhere, perhaps in a city or in a villa somewhere on the seashore. He is quite at ease over his properties, because he has a dependable manager, who will let out his fields to renters and pass on the profits to the owner.

To his great consternation he hears rumors that his manager is a crook; he is deceiving him. Just who had brought these accusations against the manager to the landlord, is not stated. However, the owner of the farms knows that he must take decisive and quick action to prevent further losses. He calls in the manager and orders him to hand over the records of his accounts. Moreover, he lets him know that he is to be relieved of his job. Whether the landowner first investigated the rumors, to make sure that what he had heard was based on fact, is not reported. The manager is fired, and now faces a bleak future.

What is he to do? He ponders his future. Suddenly he hits upon a brilliant plan. He calls in several of the renters (only two are mentioned) who still owe him a considerable amount of money. Either the crops had failed or perhaps he had asked for more rent than the renters could afford to pay. Be that as it may, they are in debt.

One by one he meets with these debtors privately in his office, and offers to cut their debt in half. Just what his motives were is not spelled out in the story, but we can infer from the parable, that such a generous act on his part would accomplish at least two things: one, it might encourage the debtors to pay off the

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smaller debt. More importantly, the manager would have gained friends by his seeming generosity, and when he vacates his post, they will obviously be kind to him in return and shelter him.

He is not used to physical labor, for he has enjoyed a soft occupation as manager. He is not able to "dig," as he confesses. And begging? What a shame that would be! So without conscience qualms, it seems, he doctors the books, and relieves the debtors of a large portion of their debt and thereby secures for himself a future. That he causes his landlord losses, is of no concern to him.

The response of Jesus to the manager's astute scheme (or is it the response of the landowner) puzzles us a bit. If the word "lord" refers to Jesus, our Lord admires the manager's cleverness, because he is willing to take losses for the sake of a secure future. In that case Jesus is using a bad man's example to teach something good. He is certainly not suggesting that we should use dishonest methods to make ourselves financially secure. Jesus calls him "dishonest" (v. 8). Deceit is deceit, and that's wrong. If, however, the word "lord" refers to the landowner, we might picture him saying to himself, when he heard what his manager had done, "what a clever fox?" He's unhappy with what his manager has done, but he has to admire his cleverness.

What are we to learn from the dishonest action of this manager? Worldlings do what they can to secure a future for themselves here on earth. Christians also plan for their future here on earth. But there is a life beyond death, and the question is, whether we are as concerned about the life in the world to come, as unbelievers are about their future in this world. And that's where the application of this parable sets in: "Make friends for yourselves with the mammon of unrighteousness."

Jesus acknowledges that much unrighteousness clings to mammon. In the acquisition of it, the use or misuse of mammon, much wrong is done. However, that doesn't mean that we should dispense with mammon. No, we should take it and make friends with it. The day is coming, said Jesus, when mammon will disappear, will vanish (*ekleipo* gives us our word "eclipse"). And then it will be important that we made use of material goods to

make friends. If we have invested mammon in God's kingdom, we will be received into the eternal "tents" when our final hour comes.

Whether it's the friends we have made with mammon or whether it's the angels, or whether it's an impersonal "they", we will be welcomed to our eternal home, if we are faithful with what God has entrusted to us.

**34. *Why did the rich man, in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, go to hell? (Luke 16:19-31)***

This question can be answered only from the parable itself and from Scripture as a whole. Jesus tells the story of a rich man who dressed in purple and fine linen, and feasted sumptuously every day. As far as we know he was an honorable Jewish citizen.

He was not an idolater, murderer or adulterer--to mention the three most grievous sins in the thinking of rabbis in Jesus' day. That he was wealthy cannot be held against him. In fact, according to the OT law of retribution, some people may have interpreted his prosperity as a sign of divine favor. What shocks us, however, is that nothing more is said about this man than that he was rich and that he led a hedonistic manner of life. Imagine preparing the obituary for the funeral of a person about whom one can't say anything else except that he was wealthy.

At the door of his villa lay a poor man; Lazarus was his name. Very likely he was a cripple who was laid at the door of the rich man by friends in the hope that he might get something to eat from the rich table of the rich man. Lazarus was covered with ulcerous sores and dogs came to lick his boils, not because they were kinder than man, but because he could not defend himself against them. (Dogs were considered to be symbols of uncleanness.)

Poverty does not guarantee anyone entrance into heaven, but of Lazarus it is said, that when he died, angels came and carried him into Abraham's bosom. Abraham's bosom is a Semitic expression and means that he got the place of honor beside Abraham at the heavenly banquet table. Nothing is said of his funeral; nothing of his burial. Not to be buried was considered to be very shameful. But the death and burial of the rich man are mentioned. We can assume that he was given an elaborate funeral with appropriate eulogies.

But when these two men arrived in the other world, their lot was radically reversed. Lazarus enjoyed eternal felicity, and the rich man suffered terrible pain. That was hard for the rich man to

understand. He must have thought that it was all in error. He is a Jew, a son of Abraham, and so he calls out to "Father Abraham." It was thought in Judaism that no circumcised son of Abraham would ever go to Gehenna. And if one hadn't done enough good works one could appeal to the merits of Abraham. But to his great surprise he discovered, too late, that he wasn't really a true son of Abraham. The prophets, Jesus, and the apostles all make it plain, that to be a Jew outwardly does not make one a member of the true people of God. One must also have the faith of Abraham, and demonstrate this faith by good works. Like all Jewish men he was circumcised, but not in heart (Rom. 2:28f.).

And when the rich man then begged Abraham to send Lazarus over to cool his tongue with water he explained to the rich man in Hades, that there was an unbridgeable gulf between paradise and Hades. Realizing that there was no escape from his pain, he begged Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers not to follow him into torment. But Abraham explains, they have Moses and the Prophets, i.e., they have the Old Testament, and if they don't take God's Word seriously, they will also not believe if someone should come back from the dead. No doubt the rich man had also heard the Scriptures read in the synagogue, but he had paid no attention to them.

If he had paid attention to Moses, he would have heard his warnings against being hard-hearted against the needy, the widows, the orphans, and the strangers (Deut. 24). The prophet Isaiah instructs God's people to offer food to the hungry, and satisfy the needs of the afflicted (Isa. 59:10). The prophet Amos voices sharp criticism of a luxurious life style, such as the rich man had lived (Amos 6:1-6).

Lazarus did not go to paradise because he was poor, and the rich man did not go to Hades because he was rich. But by the way he lived, the rich man clearly demonstrated that he was not a genuine son of Abraham. Because he paid no attention to the Scriptures, he also paid no attention to the needs of Lazarus. He seemingly could live sumptuously every day with a good conscience, because his conscience was not informed by the Word of God. The purpose of his life had been the wearing of expensive

clothing, eating rich foods, and a hedonistic life style. Clearly he had no genuine faith. No doubt he had seen Lazarus at his ornamental gate many times, but the poor man was part of the landscape, and not an object of pity.

We are saved by grace alone, but a living faith manifests itself in good works. Faith, writes the apostle James, is dead, if it has no works (Jam. 2:17). Circumcision and uncircumcision are of no account when it comes to salvation, only "a faith that is active in love" (Gal. 5:6).

**35. *How are we to understand Jesus' saying about the two swords. Does it not contradict his teaching on non-resistance? (Luke 22:38)***

This saying of Jesus stands at the end of a series of predictions of Christ's impending captivity and death: "the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed" (Lk. 22:22). "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat" (Lk. 22:31). "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me" (Lk. 22:34).

After such predictions, Jesus counsels his disciples, "The one who has a purse must take it, and likewise a bag. And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me: 'and he was counted among the lawless'... They said, 'Lord, look, here are two swords.' He replied, 'It is enough'."

Jesus knew that his hour had come. His disciples had not yet fully grasped Jesus' predictions of his shameful death. How could the one whom they had acknowledged to be Messiah, end his ministry by being crucified? And so Jesus takes concrete steps to prepare them for this dark hour.

In order to shake them up, he asks them whether they had ever suffered want while they were with him, without purse, bag or sandal, and they answer with a decisive No (v. 35). But now, says Jesus, the situation has changed (v. 36). Now they have to equip themselves to face this terrible hour. They were to face the greatest test of their discipleship in the next few days. Therefore, they must "arm" themselves, so that they do not fail in the coming crisis.

Certainly Jesus did not suggest that they should take up arms against the temple police or a contingent of Roman soldiers. "To buy a sword" is picture language for preparedness against the forces of evil.

The disciples, however, once again misunderstood Jesus. They took his words about arming themselves literally, and assured him that they had at least two swords. Since the wearing of swords

was common practice there is nothing surprising about this. The disciples had misunderstood his advice to buy swords, if they did not already have them, and Jesus breaks off the conversation with "it is enough." The word "enough" (*hikanos*) has a Semitic background. When Moses begged God to let him enter the promised land, the Lord cut the conversation short with "Enough from you" (Deut. 3:26). We are also reminded of Elijah's exasperated expression "it is enough," when he sat down under the broom tree (I Kgs. 19:4). There are a number of OT passages in which this word occurs.

But what did Jesus mean, when he said "it is enough?" Did he mean two swords would be sufficient to fight a Roman cohort? Hardly. What he meant was, that the conversation was over. They didn't understand, and so Jesus changes the topic by saying, in effect, "enough of that kind of talk." The German Good News Bible renders the word "enough" simply as, "you don't understand me."

That Jesus did not mean to say that two swords were enough, can be clearly seen from what follows. Jesus goes with his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane where he wrestles in prayer. The disciples fall asleep, and once again he warns them of the coming crisis: "Get up and pray that you many not come into the time of trial" (22:46).

Then Judas came, leading a crowd, and he betrayed his Master. And as Jesus was arrested, Peter drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut of his ear. But Jesus responded, "No more of this!" And he touched his ear and healed it. Matthew adds, that Jesus told Peter to put his sword back into its place (Mt. 26:52). Clearly Jesus did not want his disciples to defend him with swords

Later, when Jesus stood before Pilate, the governor asked him whether he was a king (Jo. 18:33). Jesus responded with a somewhat ambiguous answer. He was indeed a king, but not the kind of king Pilate thought of. The Jewish hierarchy also understood kingship differently from the way Jesus thought of it. For them it had political ramifications. For them Messiah was a king who would clear the land of the Romans by force. But Jesus



explained before Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world, for if it were, then his disciples would in fact fight with arms (Jo. 18:36). But since his kingdom was not of this world, he would not allow them to use their swords to defend him.

And that is completely in line with what Jesus had said in the Sermon on the Mount "But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well" (Mt. 5:39-40).

**36. How are we to understand Jesus' word to Nicodemus: "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit" (John 3:5)?**

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. He is called a ruler of the Jews, which means that he was a member of the Sanhedrin. Pharisees were a minority in the Sanhedrin but exercised an influence on the public out of proportion to their numbers. He came to Jesus at night. Perhaps he wanted to have Jesus all to himself, or he wanted to avoid a public identification with Jesus. Also, it was thought by Jewish scholars that the night was the best time to study the Torah.

Nicodemus had seen the power of God at work in the ministry of Jesus and wanted to inform himself better on Jesus' mission and message. He knew that when a prophet did signs (i.e., miracles), he was to be given due respect. Very likely he wanted to dialogue with Jesus, this prophet from Galilee, on the meaning of the kingdom of God. Jesus comes straight to the point and tells his visitor that he can enter (or see) God's kingdom only by a new birth.

The concept of the new birth was known both in Judaism as well as in the Hellenistic world. It was a figure of speech for conversion, for the beginning of a new life. To begin with, Nicodemus was somewhat puzzled by what Jesus said. He did not seem to understand what birth from "above" meant (*anóthen* can mean either "from above" or "again"). It may even be, that Nicodemus deliberately misunderstand Jesus' saying about a new birth in order to draw him out and lead him to a fuller explanation.

Be that as it may, Nicodemus, like everyone else, knew that a person cannot return to his mother's womb and be born a second time. Jesus, of course, agreed with him perfectly on that point. He went on to say, that what is born of the flesh (i.e., a natural, physical birth) is flesh. Natural birth makes us a member of the human family. But to enter the kingdom of God, one must have a spiritual birth, and that is possible by "water and Spirit."

How are we to understand "water and Spirit?" Some scholars have suggested, that Jesus was harking back to the creation account

of Genesis 1, where the first creation came into being by the Spirit of God hovering over the waters. And since the new birth symbolizes a new creation, Jesus simply used the language of the first creation to describe the new creation. Paul writes: "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). But such language parallels do not lead us deep enough into the mystery of the new birth.

Others hold that the Evangelist, John, who wrote his Gospel long after Pentecost, has Christian baptism in mind. In Christian baptism the gift of the Spirit and baptism with water are closely allied. Peter told interested hearers on the day of Pentecost, that they should "repent and be baptized . . . and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Christian baptism in that respect is different from the baptism of John the Baptist, who baptized with water only. He predicted, however, that the Greater One would baptize with the Holy Spirit. In the book of Acts, almost without exception, when a baptism with water occurs, there is a reference to the receipt of the Spirit as well (Acts 2,8,9,10,19). But one must wonder, whether Nicodemus would have understood Jesus' words about water and Spirit to be a reference to Christian post-Pentecostal baptism.

There are those who have read Ephesians 5:26 back into John 3:5, where Paul speaks of the "washing of water by the word." From this statement it is then inferred, that the new birth is possible only by the Spirit and the word of God. But that, too, would hardly have crossed Nicodemus' mind.

Nicodemus was a man who read what we today call the Old Testament. He was a teacher in Israel (Jo. 3:10). Surely he must have been familiar with the prophetic passages that spoke of a new age that was to come and which was to be characterized by water and Spirit. Here is what Ezekiel had to say: "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness . . . A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit will I put with you . . . I will put my spirit within you, and make you to follow my statutes" (36:25-27). The outpouring of God's Spirit in the age to come is frequently compared to streams of water. When Jesus on one occasion offered the thirsty water to drink, the Evangelist

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explains, that he was really speaking of his Spirit, which had not yet been poured out (Jo. 7:37f.).

This is the kind of language that Nicodemus would have understood. The new birth itself, however, is a mysterious work of God. And Jesus made this plain when he compared the new birth to the wind. One can hear its sound, but one does not know where it comes from or where it goes. So is everyone who is "born of the Spirit" (Jo. 3:8).

**37. *According to John 13:15 we are commanded by Jesus to practice feet washing. Can you explain why it is that we do not practice this rite which seems to be so clearly commanded?***

Feet washing was an old oriental custom and was a way of expressing hospitality to visitors or guests. We read of Abraham, for example, who offered to wash the feet of his visitors (Gen. 18:4). It is also said of Lot, when he welcomed the same visitors to his house, that he invited them in and offered them water to wash their feet (Gen. 19:2). When one considers that people often walked barefoot or wore open sandals on the dusty paths of Palestine, one can readily understand that washing a person's feet was a kind and meaningful gesture.

As a rule the host simply offered visitors water, so that they might wash their own feet. Servants, however, would often wash the feet of their master or of the master's guests. When the host himself washed the feet of his guests, that was considered to be especially meritorious. That was what Abigail, for example, did for David's servants. This is what she said: "Your servant is a slave to wash the feet of the servants of my lord" (I Sam. 25:41).

When Jesus on one occasion accepted an invitation to the house of Simon, a Pharisee, an uninvited sinful woman off the street came in and wept at Jesus' feet, "washing" them, as it were, with her tears. When Simon protested such demonstrations of affection for Jesus, Jesus gently reprimanded Simon for his failure in hospitality. "I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment" (Lk. 7:44-46).

In the passage in which Paul instructs the church on the support of its widows, he advises that only those widows be enrolled in the church's support list who have shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet" (I Tim. 5:10).

Because this gesture of hospitality was often performed by household servants, it is not unimportant, that Jesus, at the last

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supper with his disciples, "got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel" (Jo. 13:4,5). In this way Jesus demonstrated what Paul describes in Philippians 2:7, "He emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave."

When the disciples debated among themselves who might be the greatest, Jesus reminded them that he had been among them "as one who serves" (Lk. 22:27). For someone to wash another person's feet was not only an expression of hospitality and respect, but it also spoke of the humility of the one who performed this service. By washing his disciples' feet, Jesus gave them an object lesson on humility and service. At the end of the ceremony, Jesus explicitly told his disciples, that if he, their Teacher, had washed their feet, "you also ought to wash one another's feet" (Jo. 13:14).

There have always been religious bodies who have taken Jesus' instruction on feet washing literally and have made it not an expression of hospitality but a church rite. In general, however, churches have not understood Jesus to mean that this ritual should be practiced in all cultures and for all time. Today we do not, as a rule, walk barefoot on dusty paths, and so to offer a guest water for feet washing would not be considered a kind gesture. In fact, it would probably be interpreted as an offence. Feet washing is certainly not a gesture of hospitality in western culture.

There are other ways in which we can express respect for our guests. And there are other ways in which we can express humble service to our fellow human beings. On one occasion, when I had meetings in the Paraguayan Chaco, I was hosted by a fine Christian couple. Without my knowledge, the man took my shoes at night while I slept, and polished them. (The Chaco still has some rather dusty streets and sidewalks.) Naturally my mind went back to John 13, to the account of the feet washing. Polishing my shoes was this dear brother's way of "washing" my feet.

I personally have participated in feet washing a number of times, not only in the Mennonite Brethren Church, but in other denominations as well. I have done so, not out of conviction, but in order that I might not be an offence to those who think that we

should continue to practice this oriental custom. There is no doubt, that those who practice this rite have often found it to be a great blessing. But in my view, Christ did not expect his followers to perpetuate an oriental custom, which hardly has the significance it had in the first century. The Scriptures have to be understood in their cultural context. We want to retain the teaching of Jesus, but not the oriental form.

**38. *Jesus speaks of his Father's house as having many rooms (John 14:2). How are we to visualize the future glory into which God's people will some day enter?***

We know only as much about our future heavenly existence as God has revealed to us in the Scriptures. All speculations about the coming glory must be tested by biblical teachings. Since the Old Testament has relatively little to say about the life beyond, we are largely limited to the pages of the New Testament.

The New Testament writers, however, use a variety of figures of speech when they speak of the life in the age to come, and when that is not recognized we are in danger of literalizing one passage at the expense of the other. But just as the creation account makes use of pictorial language, because what happened "in the beginning" was not witnessed by human bystanders, so also the heavenly home of the saints has been described for us by images with which we are familiar. We have to admit, however, that there is nothing on earth that is quite like heaven, and so even the images that are used when speaking of heaven give us but an inkling of what awaits us in the beyond. The author of "Jerusalem the Golden" expresses the limitations of his vision in these words: "I know not, oh, I know not, What joys await me there; What, radiancy of glory, what bliss beyond compare."

Let us then look at several pictures of this future dwelling place of God's people! First, there is this beautiful saying of Jesus, recorded in John's Gospel, "In my Father's house are many rooms."

In some of the older English versions the word "rooms" was rendered as "mansions," under the influence of the Latin Vulgate. However, the word *mone* means simply a place to stay, a dwelling place. Not only has Jesus prepared for us a dwelling place, he promises also to take us there when the time comes, "I will come and take you to myself" (Jo. 14:3). That there are many rooms assures us that there will be sufficient room for all of God's saints. Paul speaks of this heavenly building as a house "not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2 Cor. 5:1).

Second, this heavenly home is also called "paradise." No



doubt this imagery comes from the creation account, in which the first human pair is put into a pleasant garden. The word occurs three times in the NT. Once it is found on the lips of Jesus, when he assures the penitent evildoer, that he will be with him in paradise (Lk. 23:43). The second reference is to Paul's ecstatic experience by which he was lifted up into the presence of God, into paradise (2 Cor. 12:4). And the third reference is in Revelation 2:7, where the overcomers are promised fruit from the tree of life that stands in the paradise of God. This concept is drawn out somewhat more in Revelation 22. There even the river of life is mentioned as well as the tree of life from which the glorified saints eat.

Third, a rather Jewish figure of speech for the heavenly existence of the saints is that of "the bosom of Abraham" (Lk. 16:22-23). In the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, Lazarus is carried by angels to Abraham's bosom. That was considered a place of honor. John lay by the "bosom" of Jesus at the last supper (Jo. 13:23). Heaven was often thought of in terms of a banquet, and whereas Lazarus lived off the rich man's garbage here on earth, in heaven he sits at table at a place of honor, beside Abraham. This heavenly banquet is also seen as the wedding banquet of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9).

Fourth, the most elaborate description of our heavenly home is that of a city, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from God to a new earth (Rev 21). Paul calls it the "Jerusalem above" (Gal. 4:25). Earthly Jerusalem is called "Sodom and Egypt" (Rev. 11:8); it was to be destroyed (Mt. 24:lff.). But the heavenly Jerusalem is secure; it has high walls. It is extraordinary in its beauty--golden streets, gates and foundations of precious gems. There will be no night, for God and the Lamb will be its light. Also, there will be no temple in it, for a temple is a symbol of the distance between God and man. No evil will enter the gates of the eternal city. "Death will be no more," mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away" (Rev. 21:4). It is a city whose architect and builder is God (Heb. 11:10). We will rest from our labors, we will be richly rewarded for our labor of love, we will enjoy eternal life, and we will have unspeakable joy.

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What makes all this imagery significant for us, is the personal dimension of our heavenly home, we shall be with Jesus. We shall see him as he is and be like him. Indeed we shall see him face to face (I Cor. 13:12). We will see God's face and his name will be on our foreheads (Rev. 22:4), and we shall worship and serve him forever, without the gravitational pull of sin. "I will take you to myself, so that where I am you, there you may be also" (Jo. 14:3). We shall see his glory (Jo. 17:24). Do we need to know much more?

**39. Was Jesus truly "the king of the Jews" (John 18:33)?**

God had promised David, through the prophet Nathan, that he would build a house for David. "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever" (2 Sam. 7:16). This promise was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus, David's greater Son. When the angel Gabriel brought Mary the message that she would give birth to a son, he made it clear, that "the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Lk. 1:32,33).

The prophet Micah had predicted that some day a ruler over Israel would come from Bethlehem of Ephrathah (5:2). This is the passage, which the Jewish rabbis quoted, when Herod was curious about the newborn king for whom the magi from the East were looking (Mt. 2:1-6). In the minds of Jewish people at the time of Christ, Messiah was to be a son of David, the king of Israel. When Nathanael met Christ, he confessed, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the king of Israel" (Jo. 1:49). And when Jesus fed the five thousand, the people wanted to make him king, for they thought the messianic age was breaking in (Jo. 6). In his account of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the apostle John quotes Zechariah, "Do not be afraid daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming" (Jo. 12:15).

In the light of the Old Testament, Jewish rabbis were convinced that the coming Messiah would be a king. He would sit on the throne of David, and he would rule over a re-constituted Israel. Unfortunately they thought of Messiah largely as a political ruler, who would do away with foreign enemies and establish Israel to greatness.

Although this hope for a Davidic ruler can be traced through the OT, there is also another line, which evidently was not seen by Jewish rabbis. The OT also speaks of a suffering servant, who will die for the sins of the people, and whom God will exalt highly after he has completed his work of atonement (Isa. 53). In Judaism this suffering servant was, as a rule, understood to be a reference to

Israel. For this reason, also, it was hard for Jesus' disciples to understand why Jesus, who, they were confident, was God's Messiah, should suffer and die. That just was not part of the image people in Jesus' day had of Messiah. He was to be the king of Israel, and that was that.

It was because of this misunderstanding of what Messiah was to be like, that Jesus seems to have avoided using the term as a self-designation. He preferred to speak of himself as "the Son of Man." When people confessed him as Messiah, he accepted this appellation, but he didn't want his disciples to proclaim him publicly as Messiah, for that could have become the occasion for an uprising against the Romans. There were many would-be messiahs in the days of Jesus and the Romans usually put the movements they started down with brute force.

However, when Jesus had completed his ministry and he stood before the Sanhedrin and the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed one?" Jesus replied with an unequivocal "I am" (Mk. 14:61). His claim to messiahship would, of course, not have counted much when they brought him before the Roman governor, before him they would have to come with a political charge. Messiah was to be a king. And so they accused Jesus before Pilate of claiming to be Israel's king (Lk. 24:2). Pilate then asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" (Jo. 18:33). Jesus' answer to Pilate's question was ambivalent. He replied, "You say so" (Lk. 24:3). Did Jesus have doubts about his kingship? Not at all. But when Pilate used the word "king" he used in its earthly, political sense. Jesus, however, was not a political king, and so our Lord explained to the governor, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from the world, my disciples would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here" (Jo. 18:36).

Pilate, as a ruler of this world, had no understanding for the kind of kingdom that Jesus was establishing; it was the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God. But this kingdom would not be established by force, but by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Only after the death of the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, would he be the ruler on David's throne.

Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent of the charges brought against him. However, he yielded to the pressure of Jesus' adversaries and condemned Jesus to death. And on his cross the soldiers affixed the title: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" (Jo. 18:19). That wasn't the kind of king the Jews had expected and they wanted Pilate to change the title, but he refused. "Rejoice the Lord is king, Your Lord and king adore" (Charles Wesley).

**40. In Christian art one often sees the acronym INRI on the cross of Jesus. What do they mean?**

The answer to that question can be found in John's Gospel (19:19). But let me first give a bit of background. It was custom in those days, when someone was condemned to death by crucifixion, that the reason for the criminal's death was affixed to a tablet. As the condemned person was led outside the city for crucifixion (in Israel, capital punishment was not to be carried out inside the city), this tablet with the condemned person's crime written on it was held up for all to see. It was designed as a warning to others not to fall into the same trap as the criminal who was to be crucified.

The governor, Pilate, had allowed himself to be persuaded by the Sanhedrin and the screaming multitudes, who had been stirred up by the Jewish leaders, to put Jesus to death by crucifixion. The reason for his death was very likely written on a tablet. In any case it was clearly indicated on the cross: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." That wasn't the real reason why the Sanhedrin wanted him dead, but they had to come before Pilate with a political charge. This was, that Jesus had made claims to kingship, and that, in the eyes of the Romans, was treason. When the cause of Jesus' death was written on his cross, the Jews were terribly embarrassed, for they did not acknowledge Jesus as Messiah, which, in the understanding of Judaism meant, that he was their King. But Pilate, who by then was in a dark mood, when asked to change the title to "he said he was king of the Jews," refused their request.

The Gospel of John has it (19:19) that the cause of his death was written in three languages, namely Hebrew (i.e., Aramaic), Greek, and Latin. Everyone passing by should be able to read these words and be warned. Aramaic was the mother tongue of Jesus. Ever since the Jews returned from Babylon, they spoke Aramaic. Actually this practice had begun before the Captivity, but it was well established before the return to Judea. The Scriptures were still read in Hebrew in the synagogue, but they now had to have an interpreter to render the Hebrew text into Aramaic, so that the

common folk could understand. And so it was only natural that the cause of Jesus' death was inscribed in Aramaic.

Archaeologists have discovered a tablet in the area where the Herodian temple stood, written in exactly the three languages that were used to write the cause of Jesus' death on the cross. It was evidently a warning sign, put up to warn Gentile visitors to the temple, not to go beyond the court of the Gentiles. If they did, they risked being killed.

Greek was the world language at the time of Jesus, and so it was only natural that the accusation should be written in Greek. Alexander the Great, in the third century B.C., had conquered the then known world and spread the Greek language to all the lands surrounding the Mediterranean. Greek was now spoken not only in Greece, but also in Rome, in Antioch, in Ephesus, and even in Jerusalem. So widely was Greek spread, that the Jews of Alexandria felt the need to translate the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek, so that their children might understand the Jewish Scriptures. This translation was called the Septuagint. In the synagogues of the diaspora it was, therefore, not necessary to have the text translated.

The language of government at the time of Jesus was, of course, Latin. Rome ruled the world. However, when Paul wrote his letter to the Roman church, he still wrote it in Greek. But in the army, the law courts, and in the halls of government, Latin was the official language. The Greek New Testament reflects this linguistic environment; it has a number of Aramaic terms (such as *Abba*), as well as a number of Latinisms.

And now to the acronym "INRI". In Christian art it is Latin for "Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews." Jesus in Latin begins with "I" (Latin has no "J"); "N" stands for Nazareth; "R" stands for "Rex" (the Latin for "king"), and the last "I" stands for Jews.

Although this inscription angered the Jewish leaders, Pilate wanted it to be known, that Jesus had been crucified because of sedition, treason. Without knowing it, however, Pilate proclaimed a profound truth. Jesus was in fact the Messiah, the King of Israel.

But his kingdom was not of this world and so he was willing to die, to establish his reign over the hearts and lives of those who

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acknowledged him as King.

And so Jesus, by his death, tied together two strands of prophetic hopes, one, that a son of David would establish his rule forever (2 Sam. 7), and, second, he would do this by becoming the suffering servant of Isaiah 53.



***41. Why is the ascension of Jesus, as recorded in Acts 1, of such significance for the Christian faith?***

It was only in the fourth century that the church began to celebrate Christ's ascension into heaven. Easter and Pentecost were celebrated much sooner. These festivals were celebrated in Israel as well, and that may have contributed to the Christian practice. Of course, these two festivals had a different significance in Judaism than they had in the Christian church.

However, just because ascension day became a Christian festival at a later stage than that of Easter and Pentecost, doesn't mean that it is less important, or that the church held it to be of lesser significance. Since Easter came to be celebrated on Sunday, and since Pentecost, which came fifty days later, also fell on a Sunday, it was more convenient to observe these holy days, at least from the time that Sunday became a national holiday. Ascension day, however, because it came forty days after Easter, always fell on a Thursday, and that made the celebration of this very important event in salvation history a bit more problematic.

For us the question is not, whether we should observe the Thursday that comes forty days after Easter as a holiday, but rather whether we take seriously the meaning of this great event in the life of our Lord. Let me then mention a few aspects of the ascension that make it so significant for our Christian faith:

First, the ascension of Jesus was, as it were, the final act in the drama of salvation, which began when our Lord left his heavenly state of existence, took on flesh, lived among us, and died a shameful death on the cross. Jesus' ascension into heaven was a declaration that the work of redemption, for which Christ had come to this earth, was now complete. The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way: "When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (1:3).

In I Timothy 3:16 we have several lines from an early Christian hymn. It begins with the incarnation, "He was revealed in flesh," and it concludes with the ascension, "Taken up into glory." What Christ began at his incarnation, he completes with his

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ascension. Closely connected with the ascension, and vital to the Christian faith, is the outpouring of his Spirit. "Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear" (Acts 2:33).

Second, the ascension gives us the assurance that Christ is Lord over all evil powers. God never said to an angel, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet" (Heb. 1:13). However, he did say of his Son, "Who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him" (I Pet. 3:27).

Third, by his ascension, Christ has been declared Lord over all. "Therefore God has highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:7-9). Paul writes to the Ephesians, that God has set Jesus at his right hand, "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come" (Eph. 1:21). Only those who acknowledge Christ as Lord can be saved (Rom. 10:9,10).

Fourth, the ascension is also a guarantee that Christ will return at the end of the age. "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven," writes Luke in Acts 1:11, "will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Fifth, throughout this present age, while Christ is absent from his church in person, he is with the Father, interceding for us. Writing to the Romans, Paul says, "It is Christ Jesus, . . . who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us" (8:34). And the apostle John encourages his readers by reminding them that "if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (I Jo. 2:1,2).

Sixth, as risen and glorified Lord he is now always with us up to the end of the age (Mt. 28:20). Before he ascended into heaven he assured his disciples, "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you" (Jo. 14:18). And by his Spirit he is now with

his children.

And because he is now at the right hand of God, we are admonished to seek that which is above (Col. 3:1). If we take the ascension of Christ seriously, it will revolutionize our lives.

**42. *What did Jesus mean when he told his disciples that they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit in a few days? (Acts 1:5). What do people today mean, when they claim to have been baptized with the Spirit?***

Part of the answer to the question, what does it mean to be baptized with the Spirit, lies right in Acts 1:5. John the Baptist, said Jesus, had baptized with water, but the disciples of Jesus would be baptized with the Holy Spirit in a few days. The "few days" is a reference to Pentecost, when the Spirit of the risen Christ would be poured out and a new people of God, the church, would emerge.

Altogether there are seven passages in the New Testament in which the baptism with the Spirit is mentioned. Four of these are found in our four Gospels. In Mark 1:8, our earliest Gospel, John the Baptist explains: "I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." The other three Gospels also have this prediction of the Baptist. So then, in the four Gospels, the baptism with the Spirit still lies in the future. In Acts 1:5 Jesus gives a more explicit interpretation of what John the Baptist meant, namely, that he looked forward to Pentecost. (Matthew and Luke also speak of the coming baptism with fire, but we need not deal with the meaning of that baptism at this point.)

In the four Gospels and in Acts 1:5 the baptism with the Spirit refers to Pentecost. It should be added, that the baptism with the Spirit did not do away with water baptism. When thousands put their faith in Christ and received the gift of the Holy Spirit on that first Christian Pentecost, they were also baptized with water and were thereby incorporated into the new community, the Christian church. Whether those followers of Jesus who had been baptized with water prior to Pentecost, were baptized again, is not likely. Although the book of Acts is silent on that question, scholars, such as F.F. Bruce, hold that the gift of the Spirit received at Pentecost transmuted their previous water baptism into Christian baptism. In Christian baptism, water and Spirit go together.

We have one other passage in Acts in which the baptism with the Spirit is mentioned. In Acts 11:16, Peter reports to the

Jerusalem church on the conversion of Gentiles in the household of Cornelius. These Gentiles had received the Spirit when they believed and had then been baptized with water. And when that happened, Peter had recalled what Jesus said (in Acts 1:5), "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

He leaves off "in a few days," because we are now in the post-Pentecost period. Clearly this sixth reference to the baptism with the Spirit also speaks of the Pentecost event.

There is, however, one passage in Paul, in which the baptism with the Spirit does not refer to Pentecost specifically, but describes the incorporation of believers into the body of Christ. "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13). It should be noticed, first, that all believers are baptized with the Holy Spirit, when they become members of the body of Christ. Just as in Acts 1:5, where the baptism with the Spirit spoke of the founding of the church at Pentecost, so Paul uses this expression to indicate the beginning of the Christian life, when people put their faith in Christ and become members of his body.

What has created confusion in our churches today, is the use of the phrase "baptism with the Spirit," in charismatic circles, in which it is applied to a second work of grace, following conversion. Although we have no doubt that believers often have profound spiritual experiences following conversion, such experiences should not be described as baptisms in the Spirit, because in the New Testament the baptism in the Spirit always refers to the beginning of the Christian life.

In the Pentecostal tradition it is usually held that those who have had a second work of grace, called a baptism with the Spirit, also speak in tongues, which is then thought to be evidence of such a baptism. But Paul makes it plain, that the gift of tongues is not given to all believers.

Believers are exhorted to be "filled" with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18), but nowhere are we asked to be baptized with the Spirit. Baptism with the Spirit occurs at the beginning of the Christian life; to be filled with the Spirit is something we should constantly

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desire and pray for. If someone should ask me whether I was baptized with the Spirit, I would say Yes, for without such a baptism I could not be a member of Christ's church. But if someone should ask me, whether I am full of the Spirit of God, I would let others witness to that. It is my constant prayer to be full of the Spirit.

***43. How did the first Christian Pentecost, as described in Acts 2, differ from the traditional Jewish Pentecost?***

We should begin by distinguishing between the significance of Pentecost as it was originally celebrated in Israel and the meaning it had in Judaism at the time of Jesus. Pentecost came fifty days after Passover (the word “Pentecost” means “fifty”). At Passover a sheaf of barley was dedicated to God, and that marked the beginning of the grain harvest. Seven weeks later Israel celebrated the conclusion of the harvest, and for that reason Pentecost is also known as the “Feast of Weeks.” (Ex. 34:22; Deut. 16:10). It is also called simply a “Harvest Festival” or the “Day of Firstfruits” (Ex. 23:16; Num. 28:26).

Pentecost was the second of the three great Jewish annual festivals. No work was to be done on this day, for it was made a day of “holy convocation” (Lev. 23:21). It was expected that every adult male in Israel would attend Pentecost in Jerusalem at least once in his lifetime. On this day two freshly baked loaves were dedicated to God, together with other sacrifices (Lev. 23:17-20).

Pentecost was a joyous festival in Israel (Deut. 16:16), a day of thanksgiving. The meaning of Pentecost, however, changed over time. In the years between Old Testament and New Testament times Pentecost became the day on which the giving of the Law Sinai was commemorated. In the Qumran community Pentecost was observed also as a day of covenant renewal.

In God’s sovereign plan, the Holy Spirit of the risen and ascended Lord was poured out on this Jewish festival. This led to the creation of a new people of God, the church. It was only natural, then, for the church to look upon Pentecost as a sacred day—the church’s birthday, one might say. And when the church, with its historical roots in Jewish history, began to observe this day as a festival, some of the aspects of Pentecost as celebrated in Israel were undoubtedly remembered.

First, Pentecost was called the Feast of Firstfruits in Israel. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit is called the firstfruits.

"And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies (Rom. 8:23). The Holy Spirit is a foretaste of what is yet to come. Paul calls it a down payment. The Spirit is the pledge of our inheritance (Eph. 1:14). It may even be that Luke thought of the conversion and baptism of the three thousand on the day of Pentecost as a kind of foretaste of what was yet to come, when crowds too vast to be numbered from every tongue and nation would be gathered before the throne of God.

Second, Pentecost was a very joyous festival in Israel. Levites, servants, widows and orphans, as well as strangers were to participate in the joy of this festival. The Holy Spirit is supremely a Spirit of joy. The fruit of the Spirit, writes Paul, is "joy" (Gal. 5:22). "For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17). The believers in Antioch of Pisidia are said to have been "filled with joy and the Holy Spirit" (Acts 13:52). The Thessalonians received the word with "joy in the Holy Spirit" (I Thess. 1:6).

Third, in some circles of Judaism, Pentecost was a day in which they renewed their covenant with God. The new covenant, promised by the prophets, had been established by the death of Jesus. The coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, put the capstone on Christ's atoning death. God's servants are now ministers of the new covenant. Their service is called a ministry of the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:8).

Fourth, it was a Jewish tradition, that God had offered his covenant to all nations at Sinai. (We have a long list of nations represented at the first Christian Pentecost, in Acts 2:5-12.) The Jewish writer Philo speaks of attendant circumstances of the Sinai event in a manner that is reminiscent of the first Christian Pentecost. Israel, he says, heard an "echo" (the word used in Acts 2:2). This echo changed into fire (the fire is also mentioned in Acts 2:3), and God spoke to every nation in the language they understood (something similar happened on the first Christian Pentecost).

But in spite of such similarities, Pentecost in the Christian



church, has a very different meaning from what it had in Judaism. Jewish Christians in the early period of Christianity still observed this Jewish festival. Paul, for example, wanted to travel to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost (Acts 20:16). But as time went by, Christians filled the celebration of Pentecost with new meaning. The outpouring of the Spirit was commemorated as the birthday of the church.

***44. When the Samaritans (Acts 8) accepted the Gospel, they did not immediately receive the Holy Spirit, something that regularly occurred when people were converted to Christ. How do we explain this incongruity?***

The experience of the Samaritan believers is unique, and it is legitimate to ask the question, why? What happened in their case seems to contradict the promise of Peter on the day of Pentecost, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Evidently this had not happened in the case of the Samaritans.

Before we seek to understand this most unusual experience, let us call to mind the context of the conversion of the Samaritans. When persecution broke out in Jerusalem, many Christians left the city and spread the gospel in the environs of Jerusalem and beyond. Among those who were scattered, was also Philip, who has come to be known as the evangelist. He went into Samaria and proclaimed the gospel.

Many of the Samaritans who heard him accepted the good news. Also, the miracles, which Philip performed in Jesus' name, made a deep impression upon them. Luke reports that "when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women" (Acts 8:12). (That Simon the magician also believed and got baptized, evidently out of ulterior motives, is a matter that need not detain us here.)

Had Luke ended the story of the conversion and baptism of the Samaritans at this point, we would have no questions. The account would not be different from the conversion story of the Philippian jailor, in which the Holy Spirit is also not mentioned (although in both of these stories the joy of the believers, which is a fruit of the Spirit, is mentioned). But what follows now raises many questions for Bible readers today. The apostles in Jerusalem heard of the conversion of the Samaritans and they sent Peter and John to visit these new converts. When they arrived, they noticed

that these Samaritan believers had not received the Holy Spirit. After prayer and the laying on of hands, the Holy Spirit was given to them. Ordinarily, when people were converted and got baptized, they received the Spirit, as Peter had promised they would. But in this case, that had not happened. How are we to explain this discrepancy in their salvation experience?

1. In churches where infant baptism is practiced, some scholars have interpreted what happened through the laying on of hands by the apostles, to be confirmation. But it would be hard to argue from the New Testament that confirmation was known in the first century. It came in with infant baptism.

2. Some scholars say, the Samaritans were not yet genuine Christians. They argue from Romans 8:9, that anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ, does not belong to him. But there is nothing in the text to suggest that their conversion was not genuine. Philip had proclaimed the gospel, they had accepted the good news, and, what regularly happened, they were baptized.

3. In the modern charismatic movements, the experience of the Samaritans is usually interpreted to be a second work of grace, called (incorrectly) the baptism with the Holy Spirit. In other words, they were genuinely converted and had received the Spirit (although that is not stated), and were then baptized. But when Peter and John came down they had a second experience, and they then received the gifts of the Spirit, specifically, according to Pentecostal teaching, the gift of tongues. However the text has nothing to say about gifts (although we can be sure they also received gifts). They had not yet received the Holy Spirit.

4. There is, we believe, a better explanation for the unusual experience of the Samaritans. God deliberately withheld the Holy Spirit until the apostles could come and see with their own eyes that the Samaritans were true believers and witness their reception of the Holy Spirit. They were to have no doubts about the genuineness of the conversion of these people, so despised by Jews. The Jerusalem church had a hard enough time to accept the fact that Gentiles were receiving the gift of the Spirit when they were converted (Acts 10:11), let alone Samaritans. But Peter and John were trustworthy witnesses of their conversion. On the other hand,

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the Samaritans also needed to be assured that they were accepted by the "mother" church. Had Jerusalem not embraced the Samaritans, we might have had two distinct churches or sects. But now the wall between Jews and Samaritans was broken down. The apostles accepted the Samaritan believers and the Samaritans felt welcome in the Christian church.

**45. *What did Paul mean when he told the Athenians, that God had overlooked the times of human ignorance? (Acts 17:30)***

This saying stands at the end of Luke's account of Paul's Areopagus address (Acts 17:22-31). Paul begins his speech by acknowledging the ignorance of the Athenians. He had found an altar to an "unknown god" (v. 23) and he was about to enlighten his hearers. First, as John R. Stott puts it, he pointed out that God is the Creator of the universe (v. 24), and so it is absurd to confine him to shrines, buildings, or other structures. Second, God is also the Sustainer of life, and is, therefore, not dependent on human gifts (v. 25). Third, he is the Ruler of all humankind (vv. 26-28a). All human beings come from one and the same ancestor, and God has put a desire for God into their hearts. If they fail to find God, it is because of their own sin, for God is never far away from anyone.

Fourth, God is also the Father of all humankind (vv. 28b,29). Viewed from the standpoint of redemption, only those who put their faith in God are his children. However, when viewed from the perspective of creation, then all human beings are God's children. And this rules out all idolatry--man's attempt to create God in his own image. Fifth, God is the Judge of the world (vv.30,31). At the end of his address he reverts to the topic with which he began: human ignorance.

In spite of God's revelation in nature, called "natural revelation" (Acts 14:17; Rom. 1:19-20), humankind has suppressed its knowledge of God because of sin and unbelief. But although people have rebelled against God and gone astray, God has been patient with them. Even though his judgments have gone over this world, as expressions of his wrath against all unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18), God has not destroyed humankind but has overlooked the times of human ignorance.

The times of human ignorance must be understood as the ages prior to the coming of Christ. God did not overlook the sins of the human race, he was not indifferent. But he did not annihilate humanity, much as they may have deserved it. Their sins screamed to high heaven, but he was longsuffering and patient, not wishing

that anyone should perish but that all might come to repentance. People's ignorance did not assure them of eternal life, but it held back the wrath of God. There is a parallel to what Paul told the Athenians in his letter to the Romans. After stating that Christ has redeemed us by his blood, Paul adds: "He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed" (Rom. 3:25). He did not ignore humanity's sins, but he did not yet punish them for these many transgressions.

But, Paul explained to the Athenians that now the times of ignorance are past. God has revealed himself in Christ. And through the preaching of the good news they are now made fully accountable before God. There is now no excuse.

Moreover, Paul went on to say, not only that the times of ignorance are now past, he also pointed out that now God commands people everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30). Also, God has determined a day when the world will be judged. "He has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" (v. 31). Just when this judgment will be carried out only God knows. God has given humankind his final revelation in Jesus Christ, and he is now waiting for people to turn to Christ. The day of grace is being drawn out as it were, to give people a chance to turn to Christ in repentance (2 Pet. 3:9).

This coming judgment will be a righteous judgment. There will be no mistakes made. This final judgment will be carried out by Jesus Christ. God has decided that the world will be judged by a man, and that is none other than the One whom he raised from the dead, namely Jesus Christ. In speaking of this final judgment, Jesus himself said, that God has "given him authority to execute judgment because he is the Son of Man" (Jo. 5:27).

However, people need not despair. God has found a way for all people to be saved. Indeed, he "desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth", (1 Tim. 2:4). Through Jesus Christ people can escape the wrath of God, which will be manifested on the day of judgment, against all those who have rejected God's offer of salvation. God has atoned for the sins of the

world through the death of his Son, and that's the good news that believers must proclaim in the world.



**46. In his farewell address to the Ephesian elders, the apostle Paul quotes a saying of Jesus, "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). Where is that saying found in the Gospels?**

This saying is not found in any of our Gospels. Jesus' teachings were all given orally; he wrote no books. Jewish rabbis also taught orally; it was the standard method of teaching in those days. A collection of rabbinic teachings was published in the third century A.D., and is called the "Mishna." In English translation it runs to about 800 pages. Rabbinic students, such as Paul, were expected to commit such teachings to memory. Rabbis were always pleased when they had students with good memories.

Only a fraction of Jesus' sayings have been recorded by the writers of our Gospels. But a great many of his sayings were remembered and passed on among his followers. To be sure, our Lord taught with authority and not like the scribes, as Mark puts it (1:22), but that pertains to the content and the manner of his teaching, not to the method. His method was similar to that of other Jewish teachers. For an entire generation Jesus' teachings circulated orally, for our earliest Gospel (probably Mark) was not written until the sixties. Jesus completed his earthly ministry about 30 A.D. In the first generation, following Jesus' death, his teachings were retained in oral form. It should not be assumed that oral tradition is untrustworthy. However, there must have been many sayings of Jesus that were never written down.

We have biblical warrant for this observation. Luke, in his introduction to his Gospel, informs us that many had undertaken to write gospels, suggesting that there were written accounts of Jesus' teachings outside of the four Gospels that we have in our canon (Lk. 1:1). Moreover, the apostle John writes, that "there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (Jo. 21:25). In other words, John, like the other Evangelists, made a selection from the vast reservoir of oral tradition that went back to Jesus.

Each of our four Gospels has some material that is not



found in the others. Although, most of what Mark has recorded is found also in Matthew. Mark and Luke, however, have a considerable amount of material not found in the other Gospels, and John has gone a rather independent path, different in many respects from the Synoptic Gospels. Each of our four Evangelists had a specific audience in mind and each writer differs somewhat from the other in the truths that he stresses, as well as the way in which he puts the material together. Of course, the basic framework of the life and teachings of Jesus is the same in all Gospels. They selected their materials under the guidance of the Spirit of God and wrote them down in the Greek of that day.

Some sayings of Jesus obviously were never recorded. Some of these unrecorded sayings, however, continued to be circulated. A few of them can be found in books of the New Testament other than the Gospels. They are known as "Agrapha," which means that they are not recorded in our Gospels. Acts 20:35 gives us one of these so-called "unknown" words of Jesus: "it is more blessed to give than to receive."

When Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians, he seeks to comfort his readers who evidently had lost loved ones, by giving them "a word of the Lord" (I Thess. 4:15). The word is, that we who are alive at Christ's coming will not precede those who have died. But this word of the Lord is not found in the Gospels. It may, therefore, be another example of a saying of Jesus that was not recorded by our Evangelists.

Besides the sayings of Jesus found in the New Testament outside of the Gospels, we have variant readings in some Greek manuscripts, which suggest other sayings of Jesus not in our standard Gospel texts. For example, in Luke 6:5, Codex Bezae has, "On the same day he saw a man working on the Sabbath and said to him, 'Man, if you know what you are doing, you are blessed; but if you do not know, you are accursed and a transgressor of the law'." Now whether Jesus actually said this, is open to question, but it is an example of what scholars call "Agrapha."

Also, in the writings of the early Church Fathers, sayings of Jesus are quoted, which are not found in our Gospels. Besides, a number of papyri have been discovered in which sayings of Jesus

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are recorded. Many of them are not in line with the teachings of Jesus found in our four Gospels and must, therefore, be considered inauthentic. What we have in our Gospels, however, are sayings that can be trusted, for they come from the One of whom it is said, "Never has anyone spoken like this" (Jo. 7:46).

**47. *How are we to understand Paul, when he says, "the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (Rom. 8:27)?***

The passage begins with an acknowledgment of our weakness: "The Spirit helps us in our weakness" (v. 26). We pray because we are weak in ourselves. When we pray we confess our dependence on God and that our abilities are limited and inadequate. The very recognition of this weakness, when we come to God, is already a prayer. And the Spirit of God comes to our aid to help us in our physical, moral and spiritual weaknesses. Often we experience what Jesus said of his sleepy disciples in Gethsemane, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Perhaps there is no area of our lives in which we feel our inadequacy as keenly as in the practice of prayer. And that, too, is mentioned in our text: "For we do not know how to pray as we ought" (v. 26). At first blush we are somewhat surprised at this confession of the apostle. We think immediately of all the prayers recorded in his letters, as well as the many references to his practice of prayer. Constantly he assures his readers that he prays for them. And yet, "we do not know how to pray as we ought." If the apostle did not hesitate to make this confession, we should certainly do no less.

We can be sure Paul does not mean that he doesn't know whether to stand, or sit, or kneel, or lie, or to raise one's hands, or fold them, when praying. We cannot attach too much significance to posture, because the Scriptures suggest a variety of postures. Also, Paul probably didn't mean that he didn't know how to express himself properly in prayer. That we often feel inadequate in terms of vocabulary and phraseology when we pray, is, of course, obvious. Rather, Paul seems to point to our limitations when it comes to the mysterious nature of prayer. Often we don't even know what's good for us when we make our requests known to God. When children come to their parents with requests, parents will sometimes say Yes and sometimes No, or perhaps they promise to meet the request at a later date. Always they are

concerned about the welfare of the child. That is analogous to the way God responds to our petitions.

To be sure, there are requests we make in prayer, that are always in keeping with God's will. For example, our prayers for salvation of other people is in line with God's will, for he does not want anyone to be lost but to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth, as Paul puts it in 2 Timothy 2:4. But God does not force anyone to believe in him or to obey him. He invites people into his kingdom; he draws them by his Spirit; but they have to make the decision. God does not save people against their will. That God works in the hearts and lives of unbelievers by his Spirit is obviously a pre-condition for their obedience to the gospel.

Because we are so limited and do not know how or even what we should pray, God's Spirit comes to our aid. "The Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (v. 26). Later in the chapter we read, that Christ is at God's right hand and intercedes for us (v. 34), but here it is the Spirit that is said to intercede for us.

When we come to God in prayer we often sense the great distance between us and God. We need a go-between, a mediator, an intercessor. And the Holy Spirit is God's go-between. That doesn't mean that we don't have to bother with making our petitions known before God. No, it is the Spirit of God that sustains us in our prayer life; he moves us to pray and not to grow weary. Sometimes he reminds us of people and causes that we should be praying for--the sick, the sorrowing, the discouraged, and the servants of God. He also encourages us to make our everyday needs known to God, or even to offer our complaints before God, as the Psalmist does so frequently and poignantly. To pray, sometimes simply takes the form of describing before God our present condition.

And how does the Spirit come to our aid? "With sighs too deep for words." Some Bible readers have understood this to be a reference to speaking in tongues, but that doesn't fit the context. (There is a "praying in the Spirit" that Paul mentions in I Corinthians 14.) But in the hearts of believers there are always desires and longings that cannot be adequately clothed in human words. And the Spirit of God takes these cries of the heart and

interprets them before God our Father.

Often we groan silently in our spirits. But the Spirit intercedes for us according to the will of God (v. 27). Our spoken prayers are often colored by selfishness. But the Spirit takes and presents them to God in an acceptable manner. He intercedes for us “according to God’s will.”

**48. What did Paul mean when he said that "all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:26)?**

Students of the Scriptures are not agreed on the precise meaning of this promise. All we can do is to suggest a few perspectives and ways in which this prediction has been understood.

To begin with we should make it clear, that the Scriptures, both the Old Testament and the New, make a distinction between ethnic or national Israel and the genuine people of God, who have the faith of Abraham. God, in his grace, made a covenant with a people who had been rescued from bondage in Egypt. If Israel kept the covenant and obeyed God, they were to be his treasured possession, a priestly kingdom and a holy nation (Ex. 19:5,6). Unfortunately Israel became unfaithful and went after other gods. But although the nation as a whole became apostate, there was always a faithful remnant that remained true to Yahweh--the 7000 who did not bend the knee to Baal. This was the true Israel. One could have the sign of the covenant (circumcision), but still not belong to God, said the prophets. One also had to be circumcised in heart and ears.

And just as the prophets drew the line between the godly and ungodly in Israel, so also did Jesus and his apostles. Paul asks the question in Romans 2:28-29, "who is a true Jew?" And he answers: not one who is a Jew outwardly but "a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart--it is spiritual and not literal." And this observation should not be overlooked when we read about Israel in Romans 11:26.

Also, Romans 11:26 must be read in the context of the entire chapter. Just prior to the promise of Israel's future salvation, Paul uses the olive tree to illustrate the current situation of Jews and Christians. The natural branches, he says, were broken off because of unbelief. That means that unbelieving Jews do not belong to what might be called the "Abrahamic tree." Wild branches have now been grafted in, i.e., Gentiles, who have put their faith in Christ, who are true children of Abraham now belong

to this tree. Here again the line is drawn clearly between faith and unfaith, not between Jew and Gentile. The picture of the olive tree is, on the one hand, a serious warning not to fall away from God, as apostate Israel did. On the other hand, it is a very encouraging picture, for if God can graft wild branches into this Abrahamic tree, then surely he can also restore the natural branches. However, there is one condition: they have to turn to Christ in faith.

To be born a Jew is by itself no guarantee of salvation. Peter, when standing before the Sanhedrin, boldly declared, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, there were already more Gentile believers than Jewish. A nagging question for the apostle and for Jewish Christians generally was: why did Israel as a whole reject Christ, the Messiah of Israel? It made Paul sad, that so few of his own people were embracing the Christian gospel. However, he does not give up hope. He firmly believed that many of his countrymen would yet turn to Christ in faith. He warns Gentile believers not to be proud (11:25), for the hardening that has come over Israel is temporary, "until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved" (v. 26).

Whether Paul had a mass conversion of Jewish people to Christ, before this age comes to an end, in mind, is not quite certain, although that view is widely held. Nor is it altogether clear what he means with "all Israel." Sometimes "Israel" refers to the people of God, including both Jews and Gentiles, as, for example, in Galatians 6:16. Old Testament names are often used to characterize the church, as one can see from I Peter 2:9, where the church is called "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people"--designations for Israel. It should also be noted, that the adjective "all" is sometimes used in a general, not in an absolute sense. In fact in 9:27 he quotes Isaiah, who promised that "only a remnant of them will be saved." Is this the "remnant" that comprises the "all Israel" of chapter 11:25? Or does he mean "all the Israelites that will turn to Christ" comprise the "all Israel" that shall be saved?

One cannot be overly dogmatic in the interpretation of

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Romans 11:25. What we can say with certainty is, that belonging to Israel ethnically or nationally will not save anyone. For, "neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything" but a new creation is everything" (Gal. 6:15). Whatever may be God's future plan for the people of Israel, those who will be saved will be saved by the blood of Christ shed on Calvary.



**49. What did Paul mean when he said that he had given the Corinthian who lived in incest over to Satan "for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 5:5)?**

Paul, who was in Ephesus when he wrote to the Corinthians, had been informed about a man in their church who was living with his father's wife (either his stepmother or with his father's concubine). Whether his father was still living or not is not known. That Paul omits all censure of the woman involved, suggests that she was not a member of the church. Since the rumor of this incestuous relationship had spread and people were talking about it everywhere, Paul takes a firm stand against this great evil, without going into the lurid details.

The apostle is not only distressed because of the immorality of this particular offender, but he is disappointed also in the church in which such violations of sexual morality seemingly were winked at and tolerated. He warns his readers that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough (v.6). In other words, the church is in danger of spiritual decay. Besides, Paul must certainly have had the reputation of the church in Corinthian society in mind, when he ordered the church to take action. Even in pagan societies incest is generally taboo (v. 1).

Paul instructs the church on a proper course of action in order to restore the church to spiritual and moral health. The church is to gather in the name of Jesus; Paul will be present with them in spirit; and then the decision shall be taken to give the offender over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, with the hope that the spirit will be saved on the day of the Lord.

What does it mean to give someone over to Satan? The expression is found in only one other passage in the New Testament. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul mentions that he had given two men over to Satan (I Tim. 1:20). Basically there are two ways in which this expression has been understood one, to give a person over to Satan is to excommunicate him or her from the church. In the case of a member of the church, who continues to

live a sinful life and does not repent of his sin, the church must take action and dismiss him or her. That other steps must be taken prior to excommunication is understood, although Paul does not mention them here. We can assume that Paul was familiar with Jesus' teachings, found in Matthew's Gospel (18:15-20), where the matter is to be brought before the church for disciplinary actions, after all other efforts have failed.

In the first century the lines between the kingdom of God and that of Satan were seen rather clearly, and so, to excommunicate someone from the church, would then mean to give him over to the realm where Satan rules.

There is, however, another interpretation of giving someone over to Satan. Some scholars hold that more than excommunication is implied. If that is so, then we should probably see it as an action that could be taken only with apostolic authority, and should not be practiced by the church. The church has the right to dismiss members who insist on living a sinful life, but has no authority to go beyond that.

And now to the question, what does "destruction of the flesh mean?" Sometimes the word "flesh" is used for the body. In that event Paul has a divine judgment in mind, in which the offender suffers physically or even dies. He hopes, however, that even such a person might see the error of his ways and repent and in the end be saved (the saving of his "spirit" in this context means the salvation of the person on the day of the Lord). In chapter II Paul mentions people who violated the Lord's Supper and who had died before their time.

Some scholars, however, take the word "flesh" to refer not to the offender's body but to his sinful way of life. "Flesh" is used in that sense occasionally. The discipline of the offender is to have the salutary effect, that he repents, ceases from living in sin, and returns to the fold of the church. That is not the more likely meaning of the text, however, Paul does hold hope for the offender.

We have other passages in Scripture where Satan makes God's people suffer, but not necessarily, as in Corinth, because of sin. We might think of Job, who was given over to Satan, so that his faith in God might be tested. Or, one might call to mind Paul's

physical malady, which he describes as Satan's messenger beating him with fists (2 Cor. 12:7), not because he had sinned; it was simply a thorn in his flesh. If, then, innocent people are at times tormented by Satan, it should not surprise us when an evil-doer is exposed to Satan's onslaughts. This kind of discipline is sadly lacking in many churches today because membership is not taken seriously enough.

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**50. *What should our attitude be to the practice of women covering their heads in church? (I Cor. 11:1-16)***

We know from early Christian writings that Christian women did not dress differently in the apostolic era from other women. Of course, they avoided shameful and very costly clothes, but otherwise they wore what non-Christian women wore.

In a second century letter, addressed to one Diognetus, it is stated, that believers do not distinguish themselves from other people in such matters as foods, dress, and language (5.1). In such matters, says the writer of this apology, Christians accept the cultural practices of their day (5.4). Immoral practices, however, were avoided by Christ's followers.

It was custom in the first century for women to wear a head-covering, a kerchief, we might say, in public. A woman who went to the market, for example, without such a head-covering, would be violating what society considered to be good form. Such a head-covering had nothing to do with religion; it was simply the standard head-gear of women at that time.

It appears from I Corinthians 11, that there were women in the Corinthian church, who did not wear this kerchief when they came to church. Perhaps they were taking Paul's teaching, that in Christ there is neither male nor female (Gal. 3:28), to the extreme.

In our passage Paul is not really concerned with the way Christian women dress (he is in I Tim. 2). His concern is, that the church will come into disrepute in society, when Christian women disregard the customs of the day. Moreover, he worries, that if they dare to cast off the traditional head-covering, they might go even further, and cut their hair. But that would not be fitting for Christian women who had confessed godliness.

There is, however, something quite significant behind Paul's admonition to wear the customary head-gear. By dressing differently from men, Christian women acknowledge God's creation order. He created them male and female, and the difference between the sexes should be seen in the way men and women dress. By disregarding the head-covering, women in

Corinth evidently did what men did; they came to church without a head-covering. But the Creator is not honored when the sexual differences between men and women are erased.

Not only does Paul want the distinction between men and women to be seen in the way they dress, but also in the length of their hair. When it is stated that the hair is given to the woman for a covering (11:15), after arguing for a head-covering, Paul is not contradicting himself. Rather, just as women wore kerchiefs in those days, they also wore their hair longer than did men, and the wearing of a head-covering is then in keeping with the covering that her hair also provides. It should be mentioned, that Paul is not giving us measurements for the length of either the woman's or the man's hair; he simply wants them to show, by the way they wear their hair, that there is a difference between male and female.

In our culture today it is not customary that women wear a head-covering in public. And where that is not the case, there is no need for wearing it in church either. In the matter of dress, Christian men and women should dress in a manner that is considered decent and acceptable in a given culture. This cultural interpretation of the Bible makes the teachings of first century apostles relevant for all times. We are not obligated to carry over first-century customs, but the deeper truths of I Corinthians 11 must be preserved.

One other question in this passage is: what did Paul mean when he said that women should have a head-covering because of the angels. Let me give a few attempts to understand this phrase! Some scholars think the "angels" here are the bishops of the church, for in Revelation 2 and 3, the apostle John addresses the angels of the seven churches. In other words, out of respect for church leaders, one should dress appropriately. But that probably is not the meaning.

Another way of explaining the phrase is: when the church gathers, the angels are present, and it would be in bad taste to violate good customs in their presence. It has even been suggested, that when Christian women don't dress appropriately, angels are present to carry out divine punishment on such offenders.

I would suggest, that since angels were looked upon as

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guardians of the creation order, and Paul is concerned that the creation order be respected, women should observe the difference between men and women by wearing the customary head-gear when they come to church. That applies to believers today as well, even though we observe different customs.

***51. Among the gifts of the Spirit mentioned in I Corinthians 12:14, is also the gift prophecy. What is the nature of this gift?***

We might begin by pointing out, that we do not have prophets today like those whom God anointed with his Spirit in Old Testament times, to proclaim authentic messages from God. These Old Testament prophets received their insights directly from God. They were inspired by the Holy Spirit. Peter writes, "because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet. 1:21).

There were also prophets in the early church and they are frequently associated with the apostles (I Cor. 12:28; Eph. 2:20; 3:5; 4:11). The apostles themselves had a prophetic gift. John, the apostle, who gave us the last book of the Bible, calls his messages "words of prophecy" (Rev. 1:3). The church is said to have been built on the foundation of the prophets and apostles (Eph. 2:20). They received insights into God's salvatory plans, which went beyond what had been revealed to the Old Testament prophets (Eph. 3:5). Prophets, like the apostles and teachers of the early church, were God's gift to the church to guide it in its development.

From what the New Testament has to say about the ministry of the prophets, it is clear that they were not simply predictors of the future, but they were spiritual guides and teachers of the early church. This was, of course, also the case in the ministry of the Old Testament prophets. Prophets helped the early church to find its way as it faced numerous unforeseen circumstances and issues. They exhorted the church to remain true to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles; they warned believers against evil and apostasy; they encouraged them when they were harassed.

Although we do not have prophets today in that primary sense of the word, the gift of prophesy has never been withdrawn. We do not have apostles in the primary sense of that word today either, but we still have "messengers" whom we send out to preach the gospel. Those who have the prophetic gift today do not claim to receive direct revelations from God, as did the Old Testament and New Testament prophets. However, God does give the church

people who have the prophetic gift. Even in the first century there were those who exercised a prophetic gift in the church but were not prophets in the primary sense of that word. For example, Paul admonishes the Thessalonians not to despise prophecy. Rather they are to test everything and cling to the good (I Thess. 5:20,21).

In congregational meetings, Paul suggests, two or three such prophets might speak, and the rest are to test what they say (I Cor. 14:29). This is a clear indicator that messages given by those with the prophetic gift, were not necessarily directly given by God, for if they were, the congregation would not be called upon to test and examine them.

One would not want to put carefully prepared sermons on biblical passages, as we hear them today in our churches, on the same level as these prophetic utterances. Believers in the first century met in homes and the worship services were clearly more spontaneous in nature. In such settings individual members might feel moved by the Spirit to give a word of comfort, of exhortation, of warning or of instruction to the congregation. It was for this reason that Paul preferred prophecy over the gift of tongues, for if someone should speak in tongues in public, the congregation would not understand what was being said. If, however, someone spoke a prophetic word "for upbuilding and encouragement and consolation" (I Cor. 14:3), people would understand and be strengthened in their faith.

In larger congregations, as we have them in our country, the worship services have to be more carefully planned, and so it would be a bit difficult to build into such services the spontaneous prophetic note. However, many churches have their members meet in small groups for prayer and Bible study. In such settings it would be quite possible and appropriate for someone to exercise this gift. The German theologian Lohfink writes: "Prophecy is also an interpretation of the present, criticism, exhortation, consolation. It is the proclamation of the will of God, and the encouragement of the church to move towards divine goals."

One should, however, not equate such prophetic words spoken to the church, with the voice of the divinely inspired apostles and prophets of the first century, who have given us the



holy Scriptures. Those who have a prophetic gift today cannot speak with the authority of the apostles and prophets, and all prophetic utterances have to be tested by the written word of God. When people speak a "word of wisdom" or a "word of knowledge" for the spiritual benefit of the church, we have a prophetic message. The church hears such words, tests them, and, if trustworthy, agrees to follow them.

***52. We know that the risen Christ had a meeting with Peter after his resurrection, but who is meant when Paul in I Corinthians (15:7) speaks of Christ's meeting with James?***

James is mentioned in I Corinthians 15:7 as one of the many witnesses to Christ's resurrection. "Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles." James evidently was not the son of Zebedee, the brother of John, who were members of the Twelve. Rather this appears to be the brother of Jesus (there are, of course, other men in the books of the New Testament who have the common Jewish name "Jacob" or "James," as we say in English).

That one of the brothers of Jesus was called James can be seen from Mark 6:3, where the four brothers of our Lord are named James, Joses, Jude and Simon. (He also had sisters, but their names are not given.) In those circles in which the perpetual virginity of Mary is taught, the word "brother" is sometimes understood as "cousin" or as a reference to children brought into the marriage by Joseph, Mary's husband. But all such explanations lead us in the wrong direction. Jesus is called "the firstborn" son of Mary (Mt. 1:25). The other brothers, mentioned in Mark, were born after Jesus was born.

These brothers of Jesus, to begin with, did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah (Jo. 7:5). However, after the resurrection of our Lord, they accepted him as such. Among the 120 who waited in the upper room for the coming of the promised Spirit, were also our Lord's brothers (Acts 1:14).

In the apocryphal Gospel of the Hebrews there is an interesting story. James, the brother of Jesus, it is said, had made a vow after Jesus had died, that he would not eat or drink until his brother had risen from the dead. When then Christ rose from the dead, so the story goes, Jesus looked up his brother James and said to him, "My brother, eat bread, for the Son of Man is risen among those who sleep." The New Testament knows nothing about such a vow, but it does know about a meeting of our Lord with his brother James after his resurrection. And that's evidently the meeting Paul had in mind when he wrote to the Corinthians.

This appearance of the risen Christ to his brother James made James, as it were, into an apostle of Jesus Christ, even though he was not a member of the Twelve. Although the passage is not altogether explicit, Paul mentions a meeting with Peter and James in Jerusalem after his sojourn in Arabia and his return from Damascus. "After three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother" (Gal. 1:18,19). During these two weeks Paul will no doubt have gleaned much information about Jesus' early years, prior to his messianic ministry, from his brother James, and from Peter he must have received much information on our Lord's ministry, his teachings, his death, his resurrection and his ascension.

James, the son of Zebedee, was put to death by Herod Agrippa I in the year 44 (Acts 12:2), but James, the brother of Jesus, became a leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17). Paul calls him one of the pillars of the church (Gal. 2:1-10), who, together with Peter and John, endorsed his mission to the Gentiles. At the Jerusalem Council meeting, recorded in Acts 15:13-21, James played a leading role in the decision to receive Gentile Christians into the church as full-fledged members, without expecting men to take on circumcision.

From Galatians 1:9 we learn, that James, like Peter and John, felt called to work among the Jews, but was supportive of Paul and Barnabas's mission among the Gentiles. It is also generally believed, that James, the brother of our Lord, has given us the Epistle of James. (His other brother, Jude, very likely gave us the Epistle of Jude. He begins his letter with: "Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James," v. 1).

In spite of his staunch Christian faith, James was respected also among the non-Christian Jewish community in Jerusalem. When the persecution of believers broke out, a persecution in which Paul as an unbeliever took a leading role, and Christians were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, the apostles, including James, were evidently permitted to remain in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1,2). As time went on, James was so highly regarded, that he got the nickname "the righteous." The Christian historian,

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Hegesippus, writes that James gave himself to praying for his people so fervently, that his knees were said to be "camel's knees," because of their calluses.

In the end, however, he died a martyr's death. During an interlude between two Roman governors, a Jewish high priest used the opportunity to have James put to death by stoning. James' meeting with the resurrected Lord, his brother, made him willing to live and to die for his faith.

**53. In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul makes very much of the resurrection of Jesus (I Corinthians 15). Why is this event so central to the Christian faith?**

If Christ had remained in the grave, then his atoning death would have been of no avail. Death would have conquered life. Moreover, Jesus would have turned out to be an imposter, a false Messiah, for he had repeatedly predicted both his death and his subsequent resurrection. His wonderful deeds would have been forgotten. His claims would have sounded hollow; his teachings would probably have never been recorded. Our Gospels were written in the light of Easter. The passion narratives of the Gospels hold centre stage. The Evangelists can write about Christ's shameful death because he was alive and he was now present with them by his Spirit.

The foundation truths of the gospel, as Paul explains, in I Corinthians 15:3,4, are these: "For I handed on to you as of the first importance what I in turn had received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures." So significant was the resurrection of Jesus that Paul goes so far as to state: "If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain . . . . If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (vv. 14ff.).

Had Christ remained in the grave, we would have had no Gospels, no book of Acts, no apostolic letters, with their practical Christian teachings, no book of Revelation with its assurance of eternal glory at the end of this age. Do away with the resurrection and we have no Christianity. The Christian faith is an Easter faith.

And we wouldn't be worshiping Christ as Lord on the first day of the week, if Christ had not come forth from the grave on that first Easter Sunday. There would be no church, if Christ had not come back to life. We would not be sending missionaries to proclaim the

good news of salvation, if Jesus were still in the grave. If Christ had not risen from the dead the rich hymnody of the Christian church of the past two millennia would never have seen the light of day. We would indeed be, as Paul says, a most miserable lot.

By his resurrection Christ broke the power of death. The risen Lord appeared to John on the Isle of Patmos and assured him that he had the keys of death and Hades (Rev. 1:18). Hades is the abode of the dead. People thought of it as a vast prison house with many entrances, since all people sooner or later go there. But Christ, as it were, has the key to every door that leads to death. And the one who has the keys is the master of the house. Christ is the Lord over death; by his resurrection he conquered death.

Every person (in contrast to animals) lives his or her entire life under the shadow of death. We all know that we must die some day. Death is the most feared enemy of humankind. But by his resurrection Christ has delivered us from the fear of death. The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way: "So that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death" (2:14,15). And Paul chimes in: "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?" (I Cor. 15:54,55). And, if I may add Peter's testimony, he writes: "By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (I Pet. 1:3).

The German theologian, Karl Heim, compares the resurrection of Jesus to a break in a dyke in the Netherlands. At first only a trickle of ocean water flows into the land, but, if not repaired, soon the North Sea will inundate the land. Christ's resurrection represents a break in the walls of that vast fortress, death, and all those who belong to Christ will some day follow him to an endless life with God. To be sure, death continues to do its deadly work, but we know its power was broken when Christ arose, and it's only a matter of time when that will become abundantly clear.

And because we have a living hope that reaches beyond the grave, our lives here on earth also have purpose and meaning. One

of the tragedies of our times is that people have no other purpose than to enjoy the few short years of their life, for with the grave all hopes come to an end. But deep in the heart of every person is the desire for something permanent, something everlasting. The resurrection of Jesus assures us that what we do here on earth is not in vain. Not surprisingly John, the apostle, can pronounce a beatitude on those who die in the Lord, "they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them" (Rev. 14:13).

***54. How are we to understand Paul's reference in I Corinthians 15:29 to baptism on behalf of the dead?***

In the passage leading up to this verse, Paul has shown that there is an intimate connection between the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead. After arguing that there would be no hope of a future resurrection for the believers, if Christ had not been raised, he mentions a rather unique practice with which the readers, evidently, were familiar, namely, the baptism on behalf of the dead.

Since the New Testament writers nowhere else mention this practice, and also because the Church Fathers have nothing to say about it (although it is thought that the practice was known in churches founded by the second century heretic, Marcion), we don't really know what baptism on behalf of the dead means. All we can do in a case like this, is to suggest possible meanings and then leave it up to the reader to choose the most likely interpretation. No fundamental doctrine of the New Testament is affected by our ignorance about this practice, and it is a practice that has had no place in the Christian church in the past two millennia.

Let us begin by quoting the text: "Otherwise, what will those people do who receive baptism on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on behalf of the dead?" These are rhetorical questions, which are to stimulate the readers to reflection. Paul neither endorses nor rejects this practice, but simply uses it as an illustration to show that people do take the resurrection of the dead seriously.

First, it may be that believers, members of the church, took on water baptism on behalf of those who had accepted Christ before they died, but did not have the opportunity to receive water baptism. Unfortunately there is nothing in early Christian literature to suggest that people got baptized for this reason. If this was practiced, it raises interesting questions on the significance of baptism. Baptism was a rite by which believers were incorporated into the body of Christ at a given location. What baptism was to affect, after a person had died, is hard to imagine, unless it was



thought, wrongly, to have some magical effect.

Second, some scholars think that baptism in this text must be understood symbolically, as for example in Mark 10:38 and Luke 12:50, where Jesus speaks of his own death as a baptism. In that event, the baptism that Paul mentions in I Corinthians 15:29 might mean, that when believers in those early days of the church got baptized, they did so with the knowledge that this step could lead to their own death, to martyrdom, for by baptism they publicly confessed that they were members of the church which was often harassed on those days. We all know how dangerous it was for young people in Stalinist Russia to be baptized publicly.

Third, among those who practice infant baptism, this verse has been understood to mean, that early Christians were baptized over the graves of those who had died in the faith. It was a gesture to indicate that the newly baptized infant was becoming a member of that vast company of saints, not only the living but also those who had already gone to glory. However, the Greek preposition *huper* (on behalf of) means "over" only with the accusative and here the ablative case is used, meaning "instead, in the place of, on behalf of."

Fourth, there are those who think Paul had Christian baptism in mind, which was understood as a burial with Christ in his death. That would be theologically correct, according to Romans 6. The problem is, that Paul speaks of baptism on behalf of the dead, and not of the death of Christ into which believers are symbolically baptized.

Fifth, it could even be that Christians received baptism on behalf of members of their family who had died without confessing faith in Christ. That seems a bit bizarre, for it is hard to see what effect such a baptism by a friend or relative could have on the eternal destiny of those who had already died.

There are other explanations, but let these attempts suffice. None of them is really satisfactory. That Paul had some kind of substitutionary baptism in mind, seems plain, but no one really knows what the meaning of such a baptism was thought to be. As mentioned earlier, Paul is not endorsing the practice. Nor is he suggesting that everyone is doing this. He asks, "What will those

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people do who receive baptism on behalf of the dead?" The Corinthians knew what he meant, for he uses it as an illustration of people's hope of the resurrection. Perhaps some Corinthians felt baptism was so important that in some way they wanted to assure themselves of eternal life by being baptized on behalf of the dead.

**55. What does the expression, "sealed with the Spirit," found several times in Paul's letters, mean?**

The expression "sealed with the Spirit" occurs three times in Paul's letters. We have it in 2 Corinthians 1:22, where Paul says that God has anointed us "by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment." The other two occurrences of this phrase are found in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, "In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit" (Eph. 1:13). "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption" (Eph. 4:30).

To seal something means to put a stamp of ownership on it. In the first century slaves were sometimes branded, to indicate to whom they belonged, very much like cattle are branded today, to indicate whose property they are. One might also think of a stamp in a book, which indicates the name and the address of the owner. To be sealed with the Holy Spirit is figurative language and means that God has put his stamp on the believer, to indicate that he or she belongs to him.

In 2 Corinthians 1:22, as well as in Ephesians 1:13,14, the sealing with the Spirit is closely connected with the concept of down payment or first installment or pledge (*arrabon* in Greek). The gift of the Holy Spirit is God's down payment as it were, assuring us that the rest will be given to us at a later date. It is "the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:14). He has put his stamp on us and has given us his Spirit as a "first installment" (2 Cor. 1:22). The Greek word *arrabon* (down payment) changed its meaning as time went by, and today, in modern Greek, it is the word for an engagement ring -- also a kind of first installment of what is yet to come.

When this present age comes to an end, God will acknowledge us as his own property, because we have his stamp on us, his Spirit. We have been stamped, says Paul, "for the day of

redemption" (Eph. 4:30). This day of redemption still lies in the future, when even our bodies will be redeemed (Rom. 8:23). And when that day comes, God will call us into his eternal glory, for his gift of the Holy Spirit indicates that we are his.

The question is sometimes asked: from whom did Paul get this imagery of sealing with the Holy Spirit? That question cannot be answered with any degree of certainty, but we might think of several possible sources. As a trained rabbi Paul may have taken this figure of speech from his Bible, the Old Testament. On the first pages of the book of Genesis we have the story of Cain and Abel. After Cain killed his brother and he feared for his own life, God put a mark on Cain to indicate that he would watch over him (Gen. 4:15). One might also, think of the Exodus story, in which we are told that, all those houses which were marked with the blood of the slain lamb, were spared by the angel of death. According to Ezekiel 9:4-6 the prophet is told to mark those who mourn because of the abominations committed in Jerusalem, on their foreheads. And when God then carries out his judgment on the city, those with the mark will be spared. (The mark was the letter "tau", which in its earlier form looked like our X. Some have seen in that a reference to the cross, but that is pure speculation.)

Besides the possibilities just mentioned, one might think of the seal that was most significant in Israel, namely the circumcision of all the male members of the covenant. Circumcision came to be the sign that Israel belonged to God. That this outward sign was inadequate, if there was not true faith and obedience to God's covenant commands, is something the prophets repeatedly point out.

The people of the new covenant also have a seal, a stamp. It is not circumcision, but it is the gift of the Holy Spirit. He who does not have the Spirit of Christ, says Paul, does not belong to him (Rom. 8:9). In the post apostolic period, baptism was sometimes called "sealing", but that is not the language of the New Testament.

A person is sealed when people respond to God's offer of salvation in the gospel and put their faith in Christ and his work of redemption. "In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were

marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit" (Eph. 1:13).

By putting his stamp on us, God has assured us that we belong to him and that he will keep us safe and bring us into his eternal kingdom. And the fact that we belong to God, is seen as a powerful motivation to live a holy life. Sinful behavior would grieve the Holy Spirit with which we have been stamped for the day of redemption (Eph. 4:30).

**56. Paul writes, "We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that his extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us" (2 Cor. 4:7). What does Paul mean with "clay jars?"**

This verse introduces a longer paragraph in which Paul describes his service in the kingdom of God. On the one hand, he thinks highly of his God-given ministry; it's a glorious ministry. On the other hand, Paul himself is beset by weaknesses of all sorts and suffers from all kinds of disabilities. In the paragraph just preceding our text, Paul speaks of the glory of his calling to proclaim the good news of the gospel. By the gospel people's eyes are opened, so that they can see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (4:4). By the gospel God shines into the hearts and lives of people (4:5). But this high calling is carried out by people like Paul, who are weak in themselves. This is one of the great paradoxes of service in the kingdom of God. We have been entrusted with a glorious message; it is the great treasure, which God has given us. But the bearer of this treasure is likened to an earthen vessel, to pots of clay. What might be the significance of this figure of speech?

First, pots of clay are breakable. They are very vulnerable. The German Good News Bible has, "I am but a breakable vessel." God's servants have physical weaknesses and disabilities. Sometimes the word "vessel" is in fact used of the human body. God's servants, like other people, become ill, experience need, make mistakes, become weary, carry heavy burdens, and are often wounded in their innermost self. Some bear up better than others, but even those with a healthy frame, have to acknowledge that they have weaknesses.

One doesn't want to make fanciful and illegitimate inferences from this figure of speech, but perhaps by way of application, it could be mentioned, that when vessels of clay are placed in close proximity with each other, they are more vulnerable and break more easily. Put jars of clay together and soon one will have a crack, a handle will be missing on another, and still another

will break altogether. Be that as it may, often we become aware of our weaknesses when we are asked to work in close partnership with others who tend to get on our nerves. But God has given us a precious gift, the gospel, and we carry it in vessels of clay.

Second, some scholars think that Paul used this figure of speech to illustrate the insignificance of God's servants. Pots of clay in Paul's day were cheap. One could pick up all kinds of clay jars in the many stalls of a Corinthian market for a few cents, as we say it. There is a saying, that comes from a Jewish rabbinic source, that goes like this: "Just as wine is preserved in the cheapest containers, namely in earthen pots, so the words of the Torah are preserved only by a person who is humble in his own eyes." Paul tells us in a later chapter (2 Cor. 10:10), what other people said of him: "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech is contemptible." His letters had great significance, but he himself was insignificant. The gospel is the greatest treasure we have, but it is preserved in humble containers, clay jars.

Third, there are scholars who suggest that Paul was thinking of the small clay oil lamps, which one could find in all the houses of the ancient Near East. It has even been suggested that Paul had Gideon's torches, which were carried in clay jars, in mind. Be that as it may, these little clay oil lamps were breakable and cheap, to be sure, but they served a very important function in the days when lighting was always a problem. It may just be that Paul thought of God's servants as clay vessels in which the light of the gospel was being carried and spread.

Fourth, there is another suggestion as to what the clay jars might mean. Not their breakableness, not their insignificant value, not the fact that they are bearers of light is what Paul had in mind. What he meant was, that he himself was God's "chosen vessel" (Acts 9:15). On the way to Damascus God intervened in his life and told him that he was a chosen vessel by which the message of the gospel was to come to the Gentiles. A persecutor of Christians is chosen by God's grace to be a "vessel", an instrument in God's hand, to carry out his salvatory purposes.

If this is the meaning, then we are reminded of Ephesians

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3:8, "To me the very least of all saints, this grace was given . . . to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ." When Francis of Assissi was asked why God had chosen him to be his servant, he answered: "God looked for someone who was so lowly, that he would not take credit for his accomplishments, and so he chose me." "So that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us."



**57. Paul teaches that we are saved by grace, not by works (Ephesians 2:8,9). In the final Judgment, however, the divine Judge acknowledges the works people have done. Is there not a contradiction here?**

At first blush there appears to be contradiction between faith and works, but when we probe a bit deeper we discover, that faith and works are but two halves of a whole. They are so intimately related, that sometimes one and another time the other is singled out. Even in the text in which it is made explicitly clear that we are saved by grace through faith, Paul does not fail to mention the significance of works. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing" it is the gift of God--not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life" (Eph. 2:8-10).

Perhaps no writer stresses the significance of works quite as much as the apostle James. "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (2:17) . . . . You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone (2:24)." It should not surprise us that Martin Luther had little good to say about the epistle of James. He had little sympathy for an apostle who underscored the significance of works, as did James, and he confesses, that he had been tempted to throw this epistle into the Elbe River. He called James "a right strawy epistle," and in the canonical arrangement of the New Testament books, James was pushed as far back as possible (after the letters of Peter and John).

Luther's favorite epistles were Romans and Galatians in which justification by faith is a more central teaching. In fact, he added the word "alone" when he translated Romans 3:28, "For we hold that a person is justified by faith (alone), apart from works prescribed by the law." But perhaps Luther tended to overlook the emphasis on good works even in Romans and Galatians. Paul speaks of faith that is active in love (Gal. 5:6). He exhorts the Galatians that they are to do good wherever they have opportunity (Gal 6:10). The Romans are admonished to express their faith in

practical ways, in good works. For example, they are to "contribute to the needs of the saints; (and) extend hospitality to strangers" (Rom. 12:13).

And with that we have touched upon the final judgment, in which God looks for good works as evidence of a genuine faith. Jesus said, that when the Son of Man will come in the glory of his Father with his holy angels, he "will repay everyone for what has been done" (Mt. 16:27). There is a world of difference between a person who by doing good works is seeking to earn his or her salvation, and a believer who trusts in God's grace for salvation, and expresses his faith in Christ through good deeds. And that seems to be the whole point of the parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25:31-46.

That this parable speaks of the final judgment is clear. The Son of Man will come with his angels and sit on his glorious throne. All the nations (i.e., all people) will be gathered before him and he will separate them as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. Sheep and goats regularly pastured together, but when evening came the shepherd would separate them and put them in different stalls.

The divine King, we are told, will put the righteous to his right. The Judge does not ask them to confess their faith, nor does he examine them for doctrinal correctness, he looks for the evidence of a genuine faith. Jesus had said that people would be known by their fruits (Mt. 7:20).

The righteous in our parable had demonstrated that they were true people of God by showing love for their neighbors. Love for God and love for the neighbor are two parts of a living faith. And these deeds of love are shown to "the least of my brothers," said Jesus. This expression has been understood in different ways.

Some have argued, that Jesus was referring to the treatment of the Jew by Gentile nations, but that can hardly be the meaning. Others have suggested that it's a reference to Christ's servants, for even a cup of cold water, given to them in Christ's name, shall not go unrewarded (Mt. 10:42). Some think that "the least" are simply the despised and marginalized of society (Mt. 18:100). But Jesus calls those who do the will of God his brothers (Mt. 12:48,49). We will

not be wide of the mark if we take the word "brothers" to mean simply our fellow human beings.

The righteous who enter God's eternal kingdom weren't even fully aware that they had done these good deeds. They kept no record of them. They did not trust in them for their salvation. They were saved by grace through faith, and out of that living faith they lived a life full of good works.

***58. According to Philippians 1:21 believers go to be with Christ when they die. Where does the resurrection from the dead fit into this sequence of events in the afterlife?***

In the interim, between Christ's first coming and his return at the end of this age, believers die, as do those who do not acknowledge Christ as their Savior. For believers, however, death holds no terror, for they have a living hope that reaches beyond the grave (I Pet. 1:3). Christ has broken the power of death (2 Tim. 1:10). But this triumph of our Lord over this evil power, will not become manifest until Christ returns and takes his children into the Father's house with its many rooms. John the apostle, using pictorial language, says, that when the final judgment of God on all evildoers takes place, death and Hades (the abode of the dead) will be cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14; death and Hades are here personified). In the eternal city, the new Jerusalem, there will be no more death.

When our loved ones die, we sorrow. These are the tears of nature. Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus. Nowhere are Christians criticized for grieving at the loss of loved ones. However, they do not grieve like those who have no hope, as Paul puts it in I Thessalonians 4:13. And the reason believers sorrow with hope is twofold: first, when those who are in Christ die, they go to be with Christ. Second, when Christ returns at the end of the age, they will be raised to life and be together with the Lord for ever.

What puzzles many Bible readers is, that if those who die in Christ go to be with the Lord, why is it necessary that they be raised at the return of our Lord? We cannot answer the question Why? but according to the teaching of the Scriptures, that is God's plan for his children. Although the term is not found in the New Testament, we will have to assume, that there is an "intermediate state" between death and the resurrection at the end of the age. This intermediate state has been understood at times in ways that can hardly be said to be biblical. For example, there is the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory, which also assumes an intermediate state. According to this teaching, those who have committed

mortal sin, go into everlasting punishment, and those who die in a state of holiness, go directly to heaven. However, those who were baptized and have committed venial sins, must go through a process of cleansing after death, through the fires of purgation.

This doctrine is based in part on 2 Maccabees 12:39-45, where Judas Maccabees sacrifices and prays for the dead. I Corinthians 3:10-15, is then torn out of its context, and also made to speak of purgatory, for Paul says, that those who have built with combustible material will be "saved but as through fire." From that it is then argued, that one should pray and sacrifice for the dead, in the hope that the departed will be delivered from this unhappy state of existence. But the doctrine of purgatory is not taught in the Scriptures. Also, it contradicts the teaching that we are saved by grace through faith.

Another wrong inference that is made concerning the intermediate state is that those who die in Christ are in a state of unconsciousness, until they are raised to life at the end of the age. The New Testament repeatedly speaks of death as sleep, but the word sleep is a euphemism for death. All cultures have euphemisms for topics that are uncomfortable to talk about too frankly. That sleep means death can be illustrated from the story of the raising of Lazarus. Jesus told his disciples that Lazarus had fallen asleep. They thought that was a good thing, for it was a sign he was getting better. Jesus then became explicit and told them, that he had died. We must then not argue from the word sleep, that the dead in Christ are unconscious.

What does the New Testament say about the intermediate state? To the penitent criminal on the cross Jesus said, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Lk. 23:43). When Stephanus was stoned to death, he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God, welcoming him home (Acts 7:59). Paul says he would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8). But the brightest ray of light on the intermediate state is Philippians 1:23, where Paul, facing death, expresses the desire to depart and to be with Christ, which, he adds, is "very much better." If we knew nothing else about the intermediate state, this verse would be quite sufficient. The dead are in Christ while they live; they are also in

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Christ when they die. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, not even death (Rom. 8:38,39). Whether we live or die we belong to Christ (Rom 14:8).

However, at Christ's return, the believers will be raised from the dead, they will receive new bodies, and they will be joined by the transformed living saints, and will be with Christ forever (I Thess. 4:17; 1 Cor. 15:51). That's the blessed hope of the saints.

**59. What did Paul mean when he said that when Christ became man "he emptied himself" (Philippians 2:7)?**

The word "emptied" (*kenoo* in Greek) is a figure of speech used to describe Christ's incarnation. This verb occurs several times in the writings of the New Testament, but is nowhere else used of persons. In Philippians 2:7, however, it is used of our Lord.

This self-emptying of Christ has been understood in different ways. Some biblical scholars have interpreted it to mean, that Jesus left some of his divine attributes behind when he became man. It is sometimes suggested that he "emptied himself" of his omniscience, omnipresence and omnipotence, while he retained his moral attributes, such as love, righteousness and holiness. This line of interpretation is called "kenotic Christology" (*kenosis* is the noun in Greek that designates his self-emptying).

In the 4th century a man by the name of Arius taught that Jesus was not completely divine. According to his understanding, Jesus was completely human, but not entirely divine. He had left some of his divine attributes behind when he entered upon his human existence. This line of interpretation is still followed by Jehovah Witnesses in our day.

A contemporary of Arius, by the name of Apollinarius, fell into the opposite extreme. He emphasized that Jesus was fully divine, but he questioned his complete humanity. The divine logos, so he thought, had replaced the human spirit of the Lord Jesus. He approached this question from the standpoint, that the human spirit is sinful, and for that reason Jesus could not have had a human spirit. Apollinarius, however, had overlooked the fact, that sinfulness is not essential to being human. When God created man, he did not create him as a sinner; he fell into sin later.

These interpretations of Christ's incarnation called forth strong reaction from those who took seriously both the humanity as well as the deity of Christ. It is, therefore, not helpful, and it is not biblical, to argue, that Christ retained some of his deity when he became man, but left some of it behind.

Some scholars suggest that we ought to read the expression "he emptied himself" in the light of Isaiah 53:12, where it is said of the suffering servant of God, that "he poured out himself to death."

In that event the "self-emptying" of Christ pertains to his death on the cross rather than his incarnation. But that view is rather problematic in the context of Philippians 2:7. Immediately, in the following verse, Paul does speak of Christ's obedience that led to his death on the cross, but in verse 7 he goes on to say that Christ took on "the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself." That has to do with his incarnation and not with his death.

It is probably best to understand Christ's self-emptying as expressed in taking on the form of a slave and becoming completely human and humbling himself. For us, who do not have the insights to explain the mystery of the incarnation, it is best to take Paul's poetical language seriously, so that we might at least have some grasp of this profound event. Perhaps if we wanted to express "emptied himself" in more simple terms, we might render it, as does in the German Good News Bible, "he gave it (his divine status) up willingly." He left the glory, which he had with the Father before the world began behind, came down to earth and became like one of us.

Before his incarnation, Paul writes, he was "in the form of God" (Phil. 2:5). "Form" (*morphe*) speaks of the essence of his being. He was fully divine. But then "he was found in human form" (v. 7). He was truly man. Also, he appeared in human likeness. The essence of his being is represented by the word *morphe* (form), but his outward appearance is represented by the word *schema* (outward form). Perhaps we can illustrate the difference between these two words for form in this way. A baby boy, a young man, an adult male, an old man, have very different forms (*schema*--outward appearance), but they all have the same *morphe* (they are always the same person).

But when it is said that he took on the likeness of a man, we should not infer from that, that he was not truly human, and that he only looked like a human being. This was the error made by the so-called Docetists. They taught that Christ had only a "seeming"



body, not a real one (*dokeo* in Greek means to think, mean, seem). To be sure, outwardly he looked like any other Jew in Jesus' day, but, at the same time, he was the Son of God. John the apostle warned his readers against Docetism (I Jo. 4:2). He who denies that Christ truly came into the flesh is a deceiver and antichrist (2 Jo. 7).

**60. *Can we truthfully say, that it is God's will that all people should be saved? (I Timothy 2:4)***

The message of the New Testament with respect to this question is quite unambiguous. God does not want anyone to be lost, but that "all should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (I Tim. 2:4). We have a great number of passages in the Scriptures to support this teaching. Perhaps the most well-known words of Jesus are found in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." The word "world" in this saying of Jesus means "humanity." God so loved humanity that he gave his only Son as a sacrifice to atone for the sins of the world. And the purpose of this supreme manifestation of his love was: so that no one should be lost, but all should receive the gift of eternal life.

There are theologians who teach a limited atonement, meaning, that Christ died only for the elect, whom God has chosen to be his children. Texts such as Mark 10:45 are sometimes used to support this view. Jesus said of his own ministry, that he had come to serve and to give his life a ransom "for many" (but not for all). But this is a misunderstanding. The adjectives "many" and "all" are often used interchangeably in Hebrew thought. And so, when Jesus at the Last Supper spoke of his blood "poured out for many" (Mk. 14:24), he meant "for all."

The apostle Peter, in his answer to the skeptics, who suggested that Christ's promise to return was an illusion, writes: "the Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). In I Timothy 2:4, where Paul expresses the same thought, he adds, that "Christ Jesus, himself human, (who) gave himself a ransom for all" (I Tim. 2:5,6). Not only does God desire the salvation of all people, but he also made provision through Jesus Christ for all to be saved. It is a great comfort to those who are praying for the salvation of loved ones, to know that God desires their salvation

But let us stop for a moment and focus on I Timothy 2:4. God, says Paul, desires everyone to be saved. Martin Luther, in his translation, watered down the word saved. He has, God wants all people to be "helped" (*geholffen werde*). To be sure, he does want all people to be helped, but that is hardly a sufficiently adequate translation of the Greek *sozo* (save) in this verse. Paul has our redemption from sin and eternal death in mind.

The parallel expression "and that all should come to the knowledge of the truth," has essentially the same meaning as the word "saved." By the truth Paul has the gospel in mind, the good news of God's salvation in Christ. The word "knowledge" should not be understood in a strictly cerebral sense, but in its Semitic sense, where it is used in the sense of "acknowledge" or even "experience." To know the truth means to accept the message of the gospel, which is called "the word of truth" (Eph. 1:13). It means to embrace the good news of God's offer of deliverance from sin and damnation. God has done everything that was necessary to procure salvation for all humanity. But he will not force anyone to accept his offer of salvation against his or her will.

The gospel has to be embraced, has to be accepted. And so, sad as it is, many people are being lost because they reject the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

Some Calvinists, following the 4th century theologian, Augustine, stress the sovereignty of God to such a degree, that they teach, that God in eternity determined the number of people who would be saved. It is then argued that Jesus died only for these chosen ones. And those whom God has elected will not resist his grace; they will all accept his offer of salvation. And those who have accepted his offer are then also eternally secure and cannot fall from grace. Fundamental in this line of thought is the view that humans are so depraved that they are not able to respond to God in a positive way. I Timothy 2:4 is then read through different glasses. Either the word "saved" is watered down, or one reads the text to mean that people from every tribe and nation will be saved. But one must not restrict the plain meaning of the text.

I Timothy 2:4 provides a powerful incentive to pray for unbelievers and to proclaim the good news to all people. And for

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parents who have lost children in their infancy, it is a comfort to know that God desires also their salvation, even though they were too young to make a conscious decision.

To the question, why are not all people going to be saved, we can only say: It is their decision. God's promise is: Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved and your house" (Acts 16:31).

**61. According to the King James Version, I Timothy 3:16 reads, "God was manifest in the flesh." In the newer versions we now have, "He was revealed in flesh." Which of these two is the correct reading, and why this shift? Are translators today questioning the deity of Christ?**

To the last question we can answer with a decisive No. No translator worth his salt would make a deliberate change in the text, if he did not have good reason to do so, on the basis of the manuscript tradition. But before we look at the textual differences, let us put this saying into context.

What we have here is a line from an ancient Christian hymn, which opens up to us the mystery of the gospel. It is called "mystery" because God has revealed it to us; on our own we could never have discovered it. And God revealed this mystery by sending his Son to this earth.

The first line of this hymn begins with Christ's incarnation. "He was revealed in flesh." This line alternates with a confession of Christ's exaltation, "vindicated in the Spirit." The third line reverses the pattern; it begins in heaven, "Seen by angels," and is then followed by God's work on earth, "proclaimed among Gentiles." The fifth line reverses the perspective again; it begins on earth, "believed in throughout the world," and ends with Christ's ascension, "taken up in glory." It is a christological hymn.

But now to the question: why did the translators of the King James Version in 1611 give us the rendering, "God was manifest in the flesh" while modern English versions have, "He was revealed in flesh?" The manuscripts and ancient versions do not all have the same reading. Since 1611 much older and better manuscripts have been discovered and we now have a more trustworthy text. The modern Greek New Testaments have "who" not "God." This change no doubt came about through a copyist's error and not because of some theological point of view. The word "God" (*Theos* in Greek) was often abbreviated as "th" and "s," and the "th" in Greek looks like a capital "O." But the relative pronoun "who" looks very similar (OS), and so evidently a scribe, instead of

writing "who" (OS), wrote "God" (OS), and so this variant reading slipped in. "Who" is found originally in the Sinaiticus as well as in all ancient versions and in quotations from early Church Fathers.

Prior to the 8th and 9th centuries the manuscripts had either "who," referring to Christ, or "which," referring to mystery. But later, the reading "God" became popular. This reading is then found in the so-called Textus Receptus. When Erasmus, in 1516, put out the first Greek New Testament in print, he published what came to be called the Textus Receptus. Erasmus had mostly later manuscripts at his disposal.

When Martin Luther translated the Bible into German he also used this printed Greek New Testament, as did the translators of the Scriptures into French, Dutch and also English. All the European translations that were made in the 16th and 17th century followed this text, and all of them had "God" in I Timothy 3:16. It is a rule in textual studies, that the reading that best explains the variant is usually the correct reading. Had the original reading been "God" it is highly unlikely that any copyist would have changed it.

In the 19th century many older manuscripts were discovered by archaeologists, and soon there appeared new editions of the Greek New Testament. In these newer editions the reading in our text was "who" and not "God." On the basis of these new editions of the Greek text, the modern versions in English and other European languages also changed the reading from "God" to "who."

"Who was revealed in flesh," is, of course, a reference to Christ, who by his incarnation took on a human body. And lest there be any misunderstanding, some versions have "Christ was manifested." The word "flesh" is used here not in the negative sense, as it often is, but rather in the neutral sense of "body." The Good News Bible has simply "he appeared in human form."

Precisely what the following line means, "justified in the Spirit," is not so clear. The verb "to justify" can mean, that Jesus was shown to be in the right; he was vindicated. But it is not certain whether "spirit" refers to the Holy Spirit or to Christ's spirit, as the New Revised Standard Version has it. Taking it to refer to

the Holy Spirit, we must then ask: how was he proved to be right by the Holy Spirit? We know that the Holy Spirit enabled him to perform his mighty deeds, and thereby he was shown to be God's messenger. Or, it may be a reference to the resurrection. Christ is said to be raised to life by the Spirit (Rom. 8:11). Also, Paul writes, "He was declared to be Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:3).

His resurrection proved that he was indeed God's Messiah and all his claims were validated.

**62. According to 2 Timothy 3:16 all Scripture is given by inspiration of God. How then are we to understand the many Old Testament passages that can hardly be harmonized with Christian teaching?**

This is a very relevant but also a very complicated question. It will be hard to come to terms with this question unless one subscribes to what is called "progressive revelation." God made his will known to his people in stages until Christ came and gave us God's final revelation. This view is strongly supported by passages such as Hebrews 1:1,2. "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son."

Five words in this text begin with the letter "p" and illustrate the effective use of alliteration. First we are told that God spoke "bit by bit" (*polumeros*). He made himself known gradually. In the long ages prior to Christ's coming God made himself known in stages. Abraham and Moses and the later prophets did not yet have God's final word. There were, of course, also long periods of silence, when God apparently did not speak to people directly. The rabbis in Jesus' day were of the opinion that the prophetic voice had been silenced and that at best one might now hear only "a whisper" of the voice of God.

The writer to the Hebrews says that God spoke "long ago" (*palai*) to the fathers (*pateres*) by the prophets (*prophetes*). Old Testament Israel is called "the fathers." In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus called them "the ancients." God always spoke in appropriate ways, so that people could comprehend his revelation. He spoke in a variety (*polutropos*) of ways. For example, he spoke through dreams and visions, even through the voice of thunder or the storm, and other ways. Prophets and priests, psalmists and wisdom teachers were his mouthpiece. He spoke to his people in both grace and judgment.

Through the prophet Amos God spoke to Israel about justice in society. Through Isaiah he spoke about the suffering Servant of God. Hosea spoke about God's unchanging love and



covenant loyalty. God chose human instruments to receive his revelation and to pass it on to his people. But all the revelations of God in the past were fragmentary. The messages God conveyed through the prophets were inspired by the Holy Spirit, but they were, as it were, his preliminary word. His final revelation was yet to come and it came when God sent his Son into the world. "In these last days he has spoken to us by a Son."

It seems clear, then, that the Scriptures witness to a progressive, gradual revelation of God. God carried out his plans of salvation in stages. In Christ he then put the crown on all his preliminary and fragmentary revelations. This approach to Scripture is also modeled for us in the sermons of the apostles, which Luke records in the book of Acts. They always begin with the "ancients," such as Abraham or Moses or David, and then they walk us through Old Testament history, always culminating in the Christ event--Christ's ministry, his death, his exaltation, and the offer of salvation in his name.

Perhaps an illustration could help us in understanding progressive revelation. An artist lets us watch as he draws a picture. We don't know what he is going to draw. The initial strokes of the pen or brush don't yet give us a clue as to what he will come out with. As he proceeds we begin to guess what he's going to draw. However, we, may be in for surprises. But finally the artist puts the last touches on the picture and then we see what he had in mind right from the beginning. So it is with God's revelation. People understood what God was saying in days of old. They were inspired and prophetic messages. But they were fragmentary and preliminary. Only "in these last days," as we are told in Hebrews 1:2, has he made himself known finally in the person of his Son. Now the picture is complete.

This approach to Scripture has some very practical implications. For example, it helps us to come to terms with some of the ethical problems that the Old Testament poses for Christians. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus repeatedly says, "it was said to those of old, but I say to you." The NT also makes clear that the whole sacrificial system, the dietary laws, the temple, and other aspects of Israel's life are *passee*. Moreover, on the day of Pentecost

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a new people of God was born, not tied to a race, or land, or nation. Missionary David Shenk tells of meeting a Palestinian Christian who had serious problems with the OT, the Bible of the Jews who were constantly harassing them. Shenk then pointed him to the One who is greater than Moses, and that a Christological hermeneutic made it possible to value the OT, but to interpret it in the light of the revelation in Christ.

**63. According to 1 Peter 3:21 it seems as if we are saved through baptism? Or am I not reading this text correctly?**

This verse is not easy to understand, but we shall make an attempt. As a general rule of interpretation it may be said at the outset, that abstruse texts must be understood in the light of Scripture as a whole. Moreover, passages that seem to be obscure must be understood in the light of those passages, which are more explicit and plain. But now to our text!

The apostle Peter is comparing the people of God with the family of Noah, which was saved when the waters of the Flood inundated the earth. "Eight persons were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you--not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (I Pet. 3:20,21).

That Old Testament events or persons often served the New Testament writers as types, is common knowledge. The OT was their Bible and they often dipped into these Scriptures to illustrate Christian truths. Because the God of the OT is also the God of the new, who carries out his plans of salvation, it should not surprise us that the apostles saw many parallels between the old and the new covenant.

Noah and his family came safely through the waters of the Flood because he had obeyed God's command and had built an ark on dry land. In similar fashion, says Peter, God's children are saved through the waters of baptism. That startles us at first blush. But if we read the verse to its end, we discover that our salvation is attributed to the resurrection of Christ. By our baptism, however, we demonstrate that we were buried with Christ and have risen with him to a new life (Rom. 6:3,4). That we are saved by Christ's resurrection was already stated at the beginning of Peter's first letter: "By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (I Pet. 1:3).

That water alone cannot save us, is stated in our text, "Not

the removal of dirt from the body." The washing of the body is important for hygienic reasons, but at baptism something more profound happens. The waters of baptism in themselves have no magical powers. If the cleansing of the heart has not occurred prior to baptism, we step into the baptismal font as dry sinners, and emerge from these waters as wet sinners. The baptismal waters do not cleanse our hearts. Only the blood of Jesus can cleanse us from all sin (I Jo. 1:7). In baptism we confess, that God has forgiven us our sins.

Peter writes that in baptism we are asking God for a good conscience. We should remember, that in the early church, repentance, forgiveness of sins and baptism were all of one piece. They were simply different aspects of the conversion experience. In his Pentecost sermon Peter exhorted his hearers to "repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:39).

It is possible, however, that the Greek word *eperotema* (request) also carries with it the connotation of promise or covenant. In that case Peter may have the practice of interrogating the baptismal candidate (see Acts 8:37), and this may then refer to the commitment or promise the baptized made to follow Christ faithfully--a promise that came out of a good conscience. Paul writes that those who believe in their hearts and confess with their mouths that Jesus is Lord will be saved (Rom. 10:9,10). The occasion at which such a confession was first made would be at baptism. However we may understand the details of this verse, Peter is concerned about the inner cleansing of the heart from sin, which gives the believer a good conscience. And this is affirmed in water baptism.

One question that Peter is not addressing in this verse is: whether it is possible to be saved without baptism. He knew, of course, the penitent thief on the cross was not baptized and still went to paradise. But the question of whether baptism is necessary for salvation is never discussed in the NT, because it wasn't a question in those days. In the days of the apostles, when someone accepted Christ in faith, he or she was baptized. Children sometimes give their hearts to Jesus at an early age, and it would

not be wise to baptize them immediately. But just because they wait until they are more responsible, does not mean that conversion and baptism do not belong together. Temporarily the two may be separated for a time, but theologically repentance, forgiveness, the gift of the Spirit and water baptism are of one piece.

There may be some details in I Peter 3:21 that remain somewhat obscure, but there is no question, that salvation is based on the finished work of Christ. And this we confess in water baptism.

**64. What does the apostle Peter mean, when he writes, that "since Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same intention (for whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin)" (I Peter 4:1)?**

In the first part of this verse Peter has the atoning death of Christ in mind. Our Lord suffered in the flesh, i.e., in his body of flesh, his human body. Following this comment on Christ's substitutionary death, we have the exhortation: "Arm yourselves also with the same intention." To arm oneself is figurative language, found frequently in the NT (I Thess. 5:8; Rom. 6:13; Eph. 6:11f.; 2 Cor. 10:4). It has nothing to do with soldiery, but is an encouragement to follow Christ even if it means suffering. The word "arm" reminds us of I Peter 1:13, where the apostle admonishes his readers to gird up the loins of their mind, to discipline themselves. Peter is not suggesting that his readers should seek martyrdom, but they should make a conscious and firm decision to go the way of the cross. In Philippians 2:5 Paul encourages his readers to have the mind of Christ, who not only humbled himself in his incarnation, but who also was obedient unto death on the cross. What Peter seems to have in mind is the willingness of his followers to be identified with him in his death (Phil. 3:10).

The second part of the verse is more difficult: "For whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin." As one might expect, commentators are not all agreed on the precise meaning of this statement. Let me throw out a few possibilities and then suggest what I would consider to be the more likely meaning!

1. One explanation is this: physical sufferings serve as a refining process; physical hardships help to move believers onto the path of holiness. Sufferings bring us closer to God. They become an occasion for the cleansing of our hearts. That this does not happen automatically or that it does not always happen to believers who suffer physical trials, goes without saying. However, those who are open and sensitive to God, often find in such sufferings God's gracious concern to refine their character and

make them more Christlike. But can it really be said, that those who suffer physically, are done with sin?

2. Another approach is this: Peter is saying, that when believers are willing to suffer for Jesus' sake, they have therewith decided to leave the life of sin behind them. Although they still fall into sin occasionally, they are in principle done with sin.

3. Some interpreters would like to explain this verse in the light of Romans 6:1ff. The person who is baptized into the death of Christ, has died to sin. "We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin" (Rom. 6:6). Here Paul has a principal renunciation of the life of sin in mind, which the believer confesses publicly at baptism. But bodily suffering, of which Peter speaks, is hardly the same thing as the dying with Christ, of which Paul speaks.

4. Other interpreters understand the bodily suffering of which Peter speaks in our verse as a reference to martyrdom. Obviously, if someone is put to death for the sake of his or her faith, the life of sin is over, for when believers die, they go to be with the Lord. But Peter speaks of physical suffering and not explicitly of martyrdom.

5. Let me give an explanation that goes in a somewhat different direction! Some commentators take the one who suffers physically to be a reference to Christ. But then we have difficulty with the rest of the verse, for it can hardly be said that Christ stopped sinning. He always was without sin. But perhaps one could think of it this way: After Christ bore the sins of the world on his body to the cross (I Pet. 2:24), he was highly exalted, having completed his work of atoning for sin. Consequently he has nothing more to do with the removal of sin. His work is finished. "He will appear a second time, but without sin (i.e., not to deal with sin)," says the writer to the Hebrews (9:28). Versions such as the NRSV have the second part of I Peter 4:1 in brackets. In that way its application to Christ is more easily made.

Perhaps if we combined this last interpretation with the second, we would not be wide of the mark. Through Christ's sufferings that led to his death, the power of sin was broken. If

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now his followers arm themselves with that same intention and decide to take up their own cross for Christ's sake, they would also be deciding to leave the life of sin behind. Not that they will no longer sin, but, as verse 2 puts it, they no longer live by human desires but by the will of God.



**65. The apostle Peter exhorts his readers not only to wait for the coming day of the Lord, but to "hasten it" (2 Pet. 3:12). How can we hasten the day of God?**

We begin with the question: how is the Greek verb *spoudazo* to be translated? It can have the meaning of "to hasten" or "to hurry on." But it can also mean "to desire eagerly," "to long for." If we translate the verb as "longing" or "desiring" then it would be a parallel to "waiting." Peter writes, "Waiting and longing (?) for the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire." On the other hand, if we render the verb as "hastening", then we must ask ourselves, what can we do to hasten the day of God? Assuming that is the better translation, let us see whether there is something we can do to hasten the coming day.

First, it should be clear in our minds that Peter is talking about the return of our Lord Jesus Christ at the end of this present age. This event is given a great variety of names in the New Testament coming, appearing, revelation, the day of Jesus Christ, the day of God, the last day, the day of the Lord, the great day, and others. In our text Peter calls it the "day of God." In the Revelation the apostle John calls it "the great day of God the Almighty" (16:14).

But now, what can we do to hasten this day? Jesus taught us that only the Father knows the day of Christ's return. "It is not for you to know the times or periods, that the Father has set by his own authority," said Jesus to his disciples (Acts 1:7). No one knows when the end will come, and so we are exhorted always to be watchful and spiritually alert, because we do not know the hour. Christ will come unannounced, like a thief in the night.

Jewish rabbis were of the opinion that Israel could speed up the time of Messiah's arrival. For example, it was suggested that if Israel would repent, Messiah would appear. Or, if Israel would obey God's commandments, or at least once observe the Sabbath properly, he would come.

But what can we do? The apostles give us hints here and

there. Among other things our Lord taught his followers to pray "Your kingdom come." Jesus made it clear that God's kingdom, his reign, had broken into this world with his coming. Where people acknowledge Christ as king, God's reign is present reality. However, there is also a future dimension to the kingdom, which Jesus established, and for that we pray in the so-called "Lord's Prayer." The early church prayed for this future coming of Christ's kingdom at the end of the age. Our New Testament closes with the prayer, "Amen, Come Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20). This prayer must have been on the lips of believers in the first century quite often, for it has been preserved for us in the Greek NT in its Aramaic form: "Maranatha", "Lord come."

Another important aspect of hastening the day of God is the mission of the church. Jesus told his disciples, who wanted to know what the sign of the end of this age might be, that "this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come" (Mt. 24:14). And in the so-called Great Commission the disciples are commanded to make disciples of all nations, and to remember, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt. 28:20). The church has been given the responsibility of spreading the good news of the gospel to all the countries of this world. Once that mission has been completed, the end will come. We must, of course, not seek to speculate on how close to the end we are by the number of missionaries working in the various lands of this earth, or even by the number of converts that are being made. Although Christ promises to return, once the church's mission has been completed, it would be inappropriate for us to say: "we can determine the time of Christ's coming." That is something we have to leave to God; our task is to work while it is day.

But there is another aspect to hastening the day of God. The context makes it clear, that the godly life of the believers also contributes to this hastening of the day. "Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening (or longing) the coming of the day of God" (v. 11). And immediately following our text, Peter writes, "Strive to be found by

him at peace, without spot or blemish" (v. 14). In Acts 3:19-21 Peter said something similar to his countrymen. He calls on them to repent so that their sins might be blotted out, and the "times of refreshing" might come. Jesus must remain in heaven, he says, until the time of universal restoration that God promised by the prophets. In other words, if they turn to God and forsake their sinful ways, God will usher in the day of God.

**66. *How are we to understand I John 2:20 and 27, where it is stated that believers have the anointing and therefore know all things and don't need to be taught?***

In John's day many heretics, called antichrists (2:18), claimed that they were more enlightened than believers in general. They presumed to have insights and have secret knowledge of which the ordinary Christian was not aware. In the history of the church they are often called "Gnostics." The word "Gnostic" means "to know." However, it wasn't that they knew more about the Scriptures or could interpret them more accurately than others; rather they had "secret knowledge," which in many respects was contrary to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. Among other things, the Gnostics denied the incarnation of Jesus. The "flesh" in their way of thinking was evil, and therefore it was inconceivable that Jesus could have taken on flesh (I Jo. 4:2). John takes issue with these deceivers, these "false prophets" as he calls them (I Jo. 4:1).

The apostle explains, that it is not the heretics who are illuminated, but rather the faithful followers of Jesus. They have the anointing with the Holy Spirit. "You have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge" (1:20). (Other ancient texts have "you know all things", but that is not the preferred reading.) Because believers have received the gift of the Spirit they are knowledgeable about the things of God. The knowledge John has in mind is not the kind one gains from books or the classroom. Rather it reminds us of Jesus' promise, that the Holy Spirit would lead his disciples into all truth (Jo. 14:17). Sometimes the expression "knowledge of the truth" means simply to have grasped and accepted the truth of the gospel. In I Timothy 2:4 the knowledge of the truth is a parallel to being saved. Without the anointing, i.e., the gift of the Spirit, our minds are not competent to grasp the great truth that God in Christ has procured eternal salvation for us.

The readers of this epistle of John, therefore, did not need more teaching on that central message of the gospel. That does not

mean, however, that they were not in need of more teaching on the many aspects of the Christian life. If that were so, then John need not have written this letter. He writes precisely to teach his readers. However, he cautions his readers not to be deceived by those would-be teachers who hold to heretical views.

These words of the apostle are sometimes misunderstood and we should point out some of the dangers that arise out of such a misreading of these texts. Well-meaning Bible readers sometimes claim that God by his Spirit has given them special insights into the Scriptures and therefore are not in need of commentaries or teachers. Professor Donald Carson, NT professor at Trinity, in Chicago, tells of meeting a brother who shared with him what God had shown him from a particular biblical text. When Carson questioned his interpretation of this text, he responded by saying: then the Holy Spirit must be saying different things to different people, for the Holy Spirit does not lie. But that kind of attitude leads nowhere.

The Holy Spirit enlightens our darkened minds, so that we can grasp the message of the gospel and put our trust in the saving work of Christ. But the Holy Spirit will not give us the interpretation of every verse of the Bible. The great fourth century theologian, Augustine, stressed, that the Holy Spirit does not replace grammatical expertise, familiarity with biblical geography and history. God's people, who have the anointing of the Spirit, still need to be taught. The gift of teaching, in fact, is one of the gifts of the Spirit, given to the church to build up the saints ( I Cor. 12:29; Eph. 4:11).

On the other hand, grammatical expertise by itself is also insufficient for understanding God's word. The French intellectual, Blaise Pascal, made the observation that in order to understand divine things we must love them. In other words we must be in the right relationship with the Author of the Scriptures, if we are to read them correctly. Jesus accused his learned contemporaries of failing to hear God's message: "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (Jo. 5:39,40).

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The 18th century Pietist, Johann Bengel, writes, "When I take the holy Scriptures in hand, I say to myself- That's a letter which God has written to me, according to which I am to order my life." When we study the Scriptures, using all the helps we can get, we will not really grasp the import of a passage, if we are not willing to obey what God is saying to us. However, personal piety alone is also no guarantee that we will always get it right.

**67. What did the apostle John mean when he said that Jesus came with "water and blood" (I John 5:6)?**

The expression "water and blood" is clearly a reference to Christ's death on the cross, where he laid down his life for the sins of the world. In his Gospel, John tells us of the Roman soldier who thrust his spear into Jesus' side, as he hung on the cross, and blood and water flowed from this wound (Jo. 19:34)--a clear sign that our Lord had died and for that reason they did not break his bones.

John, the Evangelist, in his account of Christ's death, was reminded of Zechariah 12:10, where it is written: "that they will look on him whom they have pierced and will mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him." Later, when John wrote the Revelation, he foresees the coming of Christ at the end of the age and then adds these words: "Every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail" (1:7). Unbelievers, who have rejected the message of salvation in Christ, will beat their breasts in despair when Christ returns. But then the day of salvation will be over.

In I John 5:6 the apostle has Christ's coming into this world in mind. "This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with water only but with the water and the blood." The word "came" must not be restricted to Christ's incarnation but would embrace his entire life here on earth. And this coming, says John, was with water, but not with water alone, but also with blood.

With these two words John pinpoints two significant historical events in the life of Christ. Water is reminiscent of Christ's baptism, and blood speaks of his death on the cross. The apostle wants to underscore the reality of these events over against the Gnostics who did not accept the fact that Jesus had taken on a body of flesh and blood. They taught that Jesus had a "seeming" body, not a real human body. Some of them taught that the heavenly Christ had come down upon Jesus at his baptism and when he died this heavenly Christ returned to the Father. In other words, only the human Jesus, not the heavenly Christ, had died on the cross. John insists that it was indeed the heavenly Christ who

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had taken on a human body who was baptized in the Jordan and later shed his blood on the cross. If Jesus had been only human and not also divine, his death would not have atoned for our sins and he could not have brought us back to God. To be our Mediator, he had to be both God and man.

John explains in our text that he did not think of this on his own, but "the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth." And that which is affirmed by the Spirit of God is trustworthy. Just how the Spirit had given this witness is not said. Perhaps we could say, that the Holy Spirit gives the believer the assurance, that Jesus of Nazareth, the God-man, identified himself with fallen humanity, when he stepped into the waters of Jordan, and when he died on the cross, he redeemed all humankind from sin and death. John may also have the coming of the Spirit upon Jesus at his baptism in mind, for the anointing of Jesus with the Spirit of God was a confirmation by God, that Christ was now equipped to carry out his work of redemption. It began with water (baptism), it ended with blood (death).

Some interpreters want to see Christian baptism and the Lord's Supper in the expression "water and blood", but that is not how these sacred rites are designated in the New Testament. Moreover, it can hardly be said that Jesus has come to us "with water and blood," if water and blood are seen as the so-called sacraments. Rather, the apostle has specific historical events in mind.

Immediately after stating, that Christ has come to us with water and blood, John mentions the Holy Spirit who makes these salvatory events trustworthy and significant for the believer. But then he adds something: "There are three that testify; the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree" (v. 7).

According to Jewish law, all testimony was to be established on the basis of two or three witnesses (Deut. 19:15). In his instructions regarding discipline in the church, Jesus says that charges against an offender should be based on the witness of two or three. And so here, in I John 5:7 John sees significance in three witnesses. Water and blood are here personified; they are witnesses like the Holy Spirit. One cannot accept the witness of



the Spirit, if one does not accept the fact that Jesus was baptized and that he died for us. The Holy Spirit assures us that by the coming of Jesus with water and blood, we have redemption from eternal death. He began his ministry with his baptism; he concluded his saving work with his death.

**68. In the letter to Laodicea our Lord, speaking through his servant John, wishes, that the church might be either hot or cold. How are we to interpret this desire? (Revelation 3:15)**

The gospel had come to Laodicea and a church had been established. We know little about the founding of this congregation, but we know that during the years that Paul worked in Ephesus all of Asia heard the word of God. This was about the middle of the first century. Later, when Paul was in prison in Rome (ca. 61-63), he wrote a letter to the church of Laodicea (Col 4:16), which, unfortunately has not been preserved.

The apostle John wrote the book of Revelation about 30 years after Paul wrote to the Laodiceans. And in his letter to this church he has nothing good to say about it. In the other letters, incorporated in the Revelation, he usually has something good to say about the churches of Asia, even though most of them also had weaknesses. But in the letter to Laodicea he has only criticisms to make.

It appears as if the Christian believers in this city had conformed to the practices of their society and, perhaps, even comprised some of their Christian convictions in order to be accepted by the non-Christian world. The other churches of Asia were harassed and persecuted, but we hear of no sufferings in the case of the Laodiceans. Moreover, in some of the other churches, addressed by John, heretical teachings were making inroads and the apostle warns his readers against them. In his letter to Laodicea, however, no one seems to have bothered to take a stand against false teachings, as did the church in Ephesus, for example. Although the members of the church were prosperous materially, the spiritual life of the church was at a low ebb. What was even more problematic was, that the church didn't seem to be aware of its spiritual condition and felt quite satisfied with itself.

This spiritually indifferent church is likened by our Lord to lukewarm water, which no one cares to drink. Consequently Christ threatens to spew out this church. (The Greek word to "spew" is *emeo*, from which we derive the English "emetic", which causes

vomiting.) The question now is, where did the writer get this figure of speech? Very likely it has its background in the city's water supply. Laodicea did not have its own source of water and had to draw on springs about 9 kilometers away. The water flowed in pipes, and by the time it reached the city, it was neither hot nor cold, but was lukewarm. Perhaps none of the 7 letters to the churches of Asia reflect so clearly the circumstances in which the readers found themselves.

When our Lord expressed the wish, that the church might be either hot or cold, we should not understand this as a choice between zealous Christianity and unbelief. Jesus doesn't want anyone to be spiritually "cold," meaning, that an unbeliever is better off than a lukewarm Christian. This has, however, been the way this desire of Christ has often been interpreted. It was thought, that there was more hope for an unbeliever to be saved, than for a lukewarm Christian. In other words, spiritual indifference in the life of a church puts it in such a hopeless situation, that Christ is ready to spew it out of his mouth. It would then no longer be a church in his eyes. But that is not the preferred line of interpretation.

Hot and cold water are both useful. One uses hot water for cooking, for the preparation of foods, for the washing of clothes. Cold water is also something wonderful. Anyone suffering from thirst knows how refreshing a cold drink can be. We need both: hot and cold water. But no one cares for tepid, lukewarm water. People don't want to drink tepid water and it serves no good purpose in the preparation of foods. It is when the spiritual life of a church becomes lukewarm, that our Lord feels like spewing it out.

However, Christ has not yet given up entirely on the church of Laodicea. This church still belongs to the churches of Asia among whom Christ walks (Rev. 2:1) and who are kept in his hand (Rev. 1:20). He still loves Laodicea and he examines the church's spiritual state in the hope that it will overcome its indifference. Christ tells the Laodiceans that they are poor (in spite of material wealth), blind (in spite of good eye medication), and naked (in spite of fashionable clothes). And he counsels them to buy gold (i.e., to receive from him true riches), and eye salve that will cure their

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spiritual blindness, and white clothes that will cover up their spiritual nakedness. So there is hope even for a lukewarm church if it opens the door to the pleading Christ.

The letter closes with a call to repentance (3:19), and this call is followed up with that heart-warming picture of Christ, standing at the door and knocking, waiting for the church to let him in to bless his people (3:20,21).

**69. *Who are the apocalyptic horsemen mentioned in Revelation 6:1-8?***

The imagery of the four horsemen probably has its literary source in Zechariah 1 and 6. There is one difference, however, for in Zechariah these horses pull wagons, and that is not part of the picture in the Revelation. But regardless of the source of the figurative language, John uses it in his own way to convey his messages. Horse racing was a great sport in the Roman world in the days of John the apostle. Nero, the Roman Caesar, took intense delight in horse racing, as did Domitian, who ruled when John wrote the last book of the Bible. It is not impossible that, although John's picture language has its roots in the prophetic Scriptures, it was also influenced by the world in which he lived.

The four horsemen are part of the first septenary of judgments, called "seals," in the Revelation. We have two more such series--the seven trumpets and 7 bowls of wrath. These three septenaries all cover the same time period, namely the interim between Christ's first and second coming, known in the New Testament as "end-times." They portray God's preliminary judgments that strike the world of the ungodly prior to the final judgment when this age comes to an end. They represent what Paul says in Romans 1:18, namely, the wrath of God that is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness. Although God's children also suffer when such judgments strike the earth, they are not under divine wrath, for God has not destined us for wrath but to obtain salvation (I Thess. 5:9).

The different colors of the horses symbolize the various kinds of judgments that strike this world from time to time. The first rider sits on a white horse. He has a bow and wears a crown of victory on his head. The horse in ancient days was something like the tank in modern armies. We must think of this horse as a war-horse. The rider on this horse symbolizes war, militarism, and lust for conquest. It represents the insatiable hunger of godless nations to conquer and to dominate other people, causing untold suffering and sorrow and death.

War, said Jesus, was a sign of the end-times (Mk. 13:9). God's children strive for peace wherever they can, but they must also be realistic enough to know, that there will be no lasting peace until Jesus returns. Until the end of this age our world will continue to live with the threat of war.

The rider on the red horse has a huge sword and takes the peace from this earth. People kill each other. This rider symbolizes civil war and strife, the breakdown of all social order, revolution and bloodshed. The twentieth century witnessed not only two world wars (the rider on the white horse), but also an endless number of civil wars, causing unspeakable tragedies among the peoples of this world.

The rider on the black horse portrays famine. The rider has scales in his hand with which to weigh the grain for food carefully. For one denarius (which was a day's pay) one can buy only a quart of wheat. If one is willing to eat barley bread one can get three times the amount. Oil and wine, however, are not to be touched. In all of these judgments there are exceptions. God sets limits. Only the final judgment is total. In 6:8 we read that only a quarter of the earth is struck. That's a sign of God's grace and forbearance. He wants people to turn to God before the end comes.

The last rider sits on a pale green horse. It has the color of death. The rider himself is called Death and Hades (i.e., the abode of the dead). He causes death, hunger, pestilence and destruction by wild animals. (These judgments are mentioned also in Ezekiel 14:21.)

When it is said repeatedly, that "it was given to him," that should not be understood to mean that these riders do what pleases God. Rather, it's an expression that points to the mysterious and hidden control over world events, exercised by the One who sits upon the throne.

It happens in human history that these four riders appear in the sequence mentioned in our text: conquest leads to civil war and this leads to famine and to death from diseases. We can see this sequence illustrated in the history of Russia in the 20th century. The First World War (the white horse) led to revolution (the red

horse), and then came famine (the black horse) and death from diseases, for example, typhus (the pale green horse).

These riders continue to ride in the various countries of this world. They bring down God's wrath upon a godless humanity. And, until Jesus comes again, they will continue their destructive work. God's people, however, do not need to fear, for there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1).

**70. *Who are the souls who the apostle John in a vision sees under the altar in heaven? (Revelation 6:9-11)***

John, the Seer, was banished to the Island of Patmos because of his witness to Jesus. Here he had overwhelming experiences. God's Spirit opened his inner eye for realities that lie beyond the comprehension of our senses. In one of these visions he sees a heavenly temple, the dwelling place of God, and in it is an altar. The altar in the earthly temple was a symbol of communion with God.

At the foot of altar John saw "souls," i.e., persons, who had been slain because of their witness to Jesus. They represent the martyred saints who were put to death by the enemies of the faith, but who are now in the presence of God. And just as the blood of sacrificial animals ran down to foot of the altar (Lev. 4:7), so the blood of these innocent followers of Jesus was poured out.

But death did not separate them from Christ. They are now at home with the Lord. When Paul faced martyrdom in Rome, he wrote to the Philippians, "I have the desire to depart and to be with Christ which is much better" (Phil. 1:23). Later, in Revelation 14:13, John calls those people fortunate who died in the Lord. Here on earth the church is oppressed and persecuted, and the suffering saints ask the question: Lord how long?

"Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of this earth?" (6:10). In this heartrending cry of the souls under the altar we hear the cry of the suffering church. It is being harassed by the "earthdwellers." This is how the ungodly are repeatedly designated in the Revelation (13:8; 17:8). The followers of the Lamb have been redeemed from this earth (Rev. 14:3), but the ungodly, whose names are not written in the book of life, are earthdwellers. The question of the church is: why does God allow the ungodly to trample on the innocent followers of Christ?

The cry of the church is reminiscent of the plaintive cries of the Old Testament Psalmists. "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Ps.



13:1). "How long, O Lord? Will you be angry forever? Will your jealous wrath burn like fire?" (Ps. 79:5). Also the cry of the souls reminds us of the parable of the Widow and the Judge. "And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?" (Lk. 18:7).

The believers are not crying for revenge, but shedding innocent blood is the apex of evil. And since God is said to be holy and trustworthy, surely he must do something about this. Believers in the midst of persecution often ask why God doesn't intervene and punish the evil doers.

But now listen to the answer the souls under altar get in response to their cry. First, they are told to put on white clothes. In other words, begin to celebrate. White clothes speak of purity and victory. The church on earth is to take this promise seriously. In the end, God will triumph and they will share in that victory. At the moment they are suffering, but the way of the cross leads home.

"They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony and they loved not their lives until death" (Rev. 12:11). The day will come when the suffering church will celebrate victory.

Second, they are exhorted to be patient. Wait a little longer, rest a little longer (6:11). (One could also say "be quiet a little longer," don't complain.) That too was to be a word of comfort for the churches on earth. With God a thousand years are like a day and a day like a thousand years. End-times are short; it won't take long anymore and then God will intervene. Here in life we are often puzzled and we don't always understand God's ways. And so we are admonished to be patient and to wait. The time will come when God will set everything right.

Third, the church is told that the reason for the delay in God's final judgment is, that the number of those who are yet to die for the faith is not complete. Before God brings the enemies of the church to justice, many more will lay down their lives for the faith.

We do not know the exact number, but God knows how many there have been and will yet be. John is not interested in the statistics, but he wants the church to know that end-times are not over yet, and as long as the church is here on earth it is subject to

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persecution.

God does not desire the death of the wicked; rather he wants them to repent and be saved (2 Pet. 3:9). And for that reason the end-times are extended, the day of grace is lengthened. But some day this time of grace will be over. God will bring the oppressors to justice, and he will bring his own to glory. At the end of the dark tunnel through which the church must go, is the light of an eternal day.

**71. *Who does the heavenly woman who gives birth to a messianic child represent? (Revelation 12)***

The apostle John was given a vision of a woman who was clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head she had a crown of twelve stars. Artists have not been very successful in drawing this picture. It wasn't meant to drawn; this is evocative art. John uses picture language to convey important spiritual truths.

The woman is heavenly in origin, at the same time she is earthly, for she is pregnant and is about to bear a child. John portrays her as crying with labor pains. That she represents the mother of Messiah can be seen from what is said about the son that is to be born. He is to rule the nations with a rod of iron (12:5). Three times in the Revelation these words from the second Psalm are quoted (2:28; 12:5; 19:15). Originally these words referred to the king of Israel, but here they are transferred to Messiah.

Suddenly another portent appeared. A great red dragon stands ready to devour the child when it is born. In the book of Revelation the dragon represents Satan. Here then we are allowed to see something of the dark background that lies behind the lovely story of Christ's birth in Bethlehem. Hans Lilje, calls it "a Christmas scene, but raised to an unusual height of intensity." The imagery of a dragon was spread quite widely in antiquity. In the Old Testament the dragon goes under the name of Rahab (Isa. 51:9) or Leviathan (Ps 74:13) or Behemoth (Job 40:15). The dragon is the arch-enemy of God and of his people, the personification of evil.

Just when the dragon was about to devour the child, it was snatched away by God and taken to his throne in heaven. The woman then flees into the wilderness where she is cared for by God. As the chapter unfolds we get a clearer picture of who this woman represents.

To begin with, the woman represents the people of Israel. Our Lord came from Judah. Salvation is from the Jews. Christ comes out of the root of David (Rev. 5:5). Quite specifically one

can also say, then, that this heavenly woman represents Mary, the mother of Jesus, who gave birth to Messiah. That doesn't mean, however, that Mary should be worshiped. As the picture unfolds, the woman becomes a symbol of the people of God, the church, for she is persecuted by the dragon (12:13). Here, then, we have an image that is flexible; the meaning changes as the vision unfolds.

But first the dragon tries to devour the child. That scene reminds us of the attempts by evil rulers to do away with the infant Jesus. We think of the slaughter of the infants of Bethlehem by order of Herod the Great. Also, one might think of the escape of the holy family to Egypt. One could also mention all the onslaughts of the dragon on our Lord after he began his ministry. From the temptation in the wilderness right up to Christ's death on the cross, Satan dogged his footsteps. But just when the dragon thought he had the Christ in his control, he arose triumphantly from the grave and the devil was defeated.

Little is said in our chapter about the child, but more is said about the mother, for she represents the messianic community that was born through the atoning death of our Lord. The woman flees into the wilderness where she is sustained for 1260 days (v. 6). The 1260 days are the same as three and a half years or 42 months (11:2,3). It is a symbolical number to indicate the length of the end-times during which God's people have to suffer the onslaughts of the dragon. But God keeps his hand over his people.

After the woman escapes from the clutches of the dragon, the scene changes, and John describes for us a war that is going on in heaven. He sees Michael and his angels locked in a fierce conflict with the dragon and his followers. The dragon is defeated and is cast out of heaven. In other words, the readers are to know that behind the conflict in which they are engaged here on earth, there is a battle between God and Satan raging in the higher spheres. For the suffering church it is important to know that Satan is overcome; he is a defeated foe, even though he still rages against the church.

The defeated dragon now pursues the woman who had given birth to Messiah. But God gives her two wings and she escapes the fury of the serpent. And in the wilderness, i.e., the church's earthly

existence, she is nourished for three and a half years, i.e., throughout the end-times. The dragon seeks to drown the woman, but the earth comes to her aid and swallows the waters. The dragon then goes after the woman's children. These are the people who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus (12:17)--clearly the church is meant.

This chapter speaks directly to our situation. We too are exposed to demonic powers, but God, in his mercy, keeps us safely in his hands.

**72. *What does the beast that the apostle John saw arising out of the sea symbolize? (Revelation 13)***

In one of his apocalyptic visions John sees a dragon standing on the seashore. Suddenly a beast emerges out of the sea. On its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names. This is also how the dragon was described (12:3), and that means that this beast has the character of the dragon, the ancient serpent, the devil. Whereas in chapter 13 John pictures the dragon persecuting the church, he will now introduce us to the evil agents of the dragon, through whom Satan carries out his evil designs against God and his people. Actually John has a vision of two beasts, both of which are inspired by the dragon. The second beast (also called the false prophet) seeks to persuade people to worship the beast from the sea.

But what is John trying to say to the churches of Asia by picturing this frightful monstrosity that arises from the sea? He wants to prepare the churches for the ongoing struggle between God and the dragon. When John wrote, the church was being harassed and persecuted not only by unbelieving Jews (Rev. 3:9,10) but also by the Roman governmental authorities. The apostle may have had the bloody persecution of Christians under the emperor Nero in mind, when he wrote this chapter. At the moment Domitian was the emperor, and he too oppressed the Christian church. The beast from the sea represents the totalitarian Roman power. The earthdwellers, says John, whose names are not written in the book of life (13:8), worship this beast. That's a clear allusion to emperor worship in John's day, something that Christians could not participate in. Consequently they were oppressed.

From chapter 17:10,11 we learn that such beastly powers arise from time to time throughout history. Their opposition to God and his people will come to a climax when the last beast arises, the Man of Lawlessness, or, as John calls him in I John 2:18, the Antichrist. God's people have to suffer under the rule of such beasts. That these beasts are an abiding phenomenon of the

end-times can be seen from the fact that the mortal wound which the beast from the sea had, had been healed. And so the apostle calls on his readers to remain steadfast. He calls "for the endurance and faith of the saints" (13:10).

This beast from the sea has a helper; it is the beast from the land. This agent of the first beast has one supreme goal: to persuade people to worship the beast from the sea (13:16). It wants people to take on the mark of the beast. That's a figurative way of saying, that it wants people to pledge their loyalty to the beast. When Christians refused to do that, they were often boycotted. They couldn't buy or sell (13:17), and so their loyalty to Christ was very costly.

In contrast to those who take on the mark of the beast, who give him their supreme loyalty, are the people of God, who also have a mark. In chapter 7 we have a scene in which all of God's children are "sealed" (i.e., stamped), to indicate that they belong to God, and all who have his stamp in the end arrive in glory. One should not think of such marks as physical identification marks. John uses figurative language to indicate that those marked with stamp of God have been redeemed from this earth (14:3), whereas those who have the mark of the beast are "earthdwellers" (13:8).

Since it would have been dangerous if John had given the name of the beast, i.e., the emperor, he uses a number instead. He says that the number of the beast is 666. In John's day the letters of the alphabet were often used in the place of numbers, and so it was possible to figure out the value of a person's name from the letters in his name. My name, for example, adds up to 14. The name David (in Hebrew only the consonants are counted) has three letters and their total is 14. It is interesting that Matthew, when he gives us the genealogy of Jesus, the Son of David, divides it into 3 times 14 (Mat 1:1-18). Although one cannot be absolutely certain which name stands behind the number 666 (there is also an alternate reading of 616), for it depends somewhat on whether one uses Latin, Greek or Hebrew letters, one possible suggestion is that the number stands for *Neron Kaisar*, when written in Hebrew letters. The apostle is confident that his readers know who he is talking about (13:18).

What are we to learn from this chapter? We must be prepared to live under ruling powers that are enemies of God and his people. We have seen the emergence of beastly rulers in the 20th century (e.g., Stalin). The church must give its highest loyalty to Jesus and not to the state, and that will often bring suffering with it. Such totalitarian regimes will emerge throughout the last days in which we live. They go to the dust and then rise again. But in the end Christ will destroy Antichrist when he comes in glory.



**73. *Who are the 144,000 of whom the apostle John speaks in Revelation 7 and 14?***

Apocalyptic writers, both Jewish and Christian, frequently employ symbolical numbers. The number 144,000 represents the people of God in their totality. That this is so, can be easily discerned from the description of the 144,000 given to us in Revelation 14.

The apostle was given a vision of the Lamb, standing on the heavenly Mount Zion. Surrounding the Lamb are the 144,000. They all have his name and the name of his Father on their foreheads. That's a symbolical way of saying that they are his, they belong to him, they have his stamp. The stamping of God's children is portrayed in chapter 7, where an angel marks them with the seal, the stamp of God. The sealing or stamping of God's children is to encourage the church on earth as it faces suffering at the hands of God's enemies, that God knows who belongs to him, and all who have his stamp will come to glory in the end. In chapter 14 John portrays all the people of God, who have come through tribulations here on earth, arriving safely home on Mount Zion, there to be united with the Lamb who redeemed them. They sing a new song to celebrate their new existence in the heavenly world

Note carefully what kind of people the 144,000 are. First, it is said that they have been purchased from this earth (14:3). "Purchase" is an economic figure of speech, which speaks of their redemption. Not only have they been redeemed from the earth, but they were also redeemed from humankind (14:4). The price of their "purchase" is not given in chapter 14, but it is mentioned in 7:14. It is the blood of the Lamb.

Also, it is stated that they have not defiled themselves with women (14:4); they are all virgins. That does not mean that the 144,000 are all men who have lived chaste lives. Nor does it mean that they are all women (the word "virgin" in Greek is the same for both men and women). And it certainly does not mean that they are all celibate, for the marriage relationship is never thought of as

defiling. It means, of course, that God's children abstain from sexual immorality. But immorality or adultery is often used by the Old Testament prophets as a figure of speech for idolatry, going after other gods, apostasy from Yahweh. It means to break the covenant with God.

Moreover it is stated that the 144,000 all follow the Lamb wherever it leads (14:4). To follow the Lamb is to walk in his footsteps (I Pet. 2:21). And just as the first fruits in Israel were holy to the Lord, so the 144,000 are called first fruits for God and the Lamb. They are completely devoted to the Lord.

Finally, it is said, that no falsehood was found in their mouths (14:5). Everything that is said of the 144,000 in this chapter is said of God's children in other parts of the New Testament. It is therefore explicitly clear, that the 144,000 represent God's people in their entirety.

According to chapter 7 the number itself is broken down into 12 tribes. John was given this number, otherwise he would not have known it (7:4). There follows then a list of 12,000 from twelve tribes of Israel. These are all round numbers. John is not interested in statistics. And all of these people have been stamped by God (7:1-4). Why then are numbers used to designate the people of God? It's a way of saying that God knows how many there are. But, by the time we get to 7:9, their number is so great, they can't be counted. We have two perspectives here: from God's vantage point, he knows how many there are; from the human perspective they can't be numbered.

That we must not equate the 144,000 with the Jewish people as such, can be gathered from the New Testament as a whole. The new people of God that emerged on the day of Pentecost is comprised of believing Jews and Gentiles. That John speaks of God's children in terms of tribes should not surprise us. The apostle James in his letter to Christian believers, addresses them as the "twelve tribes in the diaspora" (Jam. 1:1). Peter does something similar (I Pet. 1:1). Moreover, Peter carries a whole series of OT names for Israel over to the church: chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, God's own people (I Pet. 2:9). According to Galatians 6:16, the church is called "the Israel of God." Paul

raises the question of who is a true Jew in his letter to the Romans (2:29), and his answer is: the one who is a true Jew in spirit, not in the flesh. In fact the church is called "the true circumcision" (Phil. 3:3).

When Jesus chose 12 apostles, he thought of them as the counterpart to the twelve patriarchs. They were to be the foundation for a new people of God. And the 144,000 represent this new people of God.

**74. In Revelation 20:6 the apostle John speaks of a "first resurrection." Is there then a second resurrection as well?**

Although the resurrection of all humankind is clearly taught in the New Testament, the biblical writers are obviously more interested in the resurrection of the believers to whom they are writing. Jesus said, "the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out--those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation" (Jo. 5:28,29).

From this and other sayings about the resurrection one could get the impression that all the dead will rise at the same time. However, in the Revelation the apostle does distinguish between the resurrection of the saints and the ungodly as far as the time is concerned. The resurrection of the saints is said to take place prior to the millennium. John in a vision sees thrones, and the ones sitting on these thrones are the people who have been faithful to Jesus here on earth; who did not take on the mark of the beast. Although it looks as if only the martyrs take part in this "first" resurrection, I believe, it is better to see these witness as people who lost their lives for the sake of Christ, as representing the entire body of Christ. In the Revelation they are frequently called the "overcomers." The people of God come to life and reign with Christ a thousand years (20:4). The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years are ended (20:5). "This is the first resurrection."

In other New Testament texts the resurrection of the believers is regularly connected with the return of Christ at the end of this age. "For this we declare to you be the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died . . . the dead in Christ will rise first" (I Thess. 4:15,16). Paul speaks of an order in the resurrection: "Each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end" (I Cor. 15:23,24). At the last trumpet "the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed" (I Cor. 15:52,53). Paul has

those in mind who died in Christ, They will be raised to life and the living saints will be transformed and in that way made fit to enter the eternal kingdom (I Cor. 15:50).

Those who participate in this first resurrection, says John, are "blessed," i.e., they are happy, fortunate. Why? Because the second death has no authority over them. What the second death means is explained in 20:14; it is the lake of fire. Those who share in the first resurrection, which takes place on the day of Jesus Christ, will be forever with the Lord. They are not subject to the wrath of God (I Thess. 1:10).

The apostle knows also of a resurrection of the wicked, which evidently takes place after the millennium. It is sometimes called the judgment before the great white throne. "And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. . . and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire" (20:12-15).

What seems puzzling to some Bible readers is the fact, that in the judgment described in chapter 19 the beast and the false prophet are cast into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur (19:20,21). In that chapter nothing is said about the resurrection of the ungodly. In chapter 20 John puts the millennium between the first resurrection and that of the ungodly. During the millennium Satan is bound. At the end of this period, during which the saints who have come to life reign with Christ, Satan is loosed once more and he stirs up the forces of darkness (probably the evil spirits in the abyss where he was kept), and makes one final onslaught on God. However, he then is also thrown into the lake of fire where the beast and false prophet are (20:10).

The thousand-year reign of the saints need not be understood in a mathematical sense. Numbers are often used to make events concrete and to indicate that God knows how long. A thousand years are like a day with the Lord. Nor should we try to

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bring into this millennial reign all kinds of promises given to Israel in the Old Testament. In fact, it is not even stated that the millennium is earthly. John sees thrones, and thrones in the Revelation are always in heaven. In any case, the two resurrections, that of the believers and of the unbelievers, are separated by the millennial reign.

However we may understand the sequence of these eschatological events, all the dead in Christ will rise and be forever with their Lord.

**75. *Who will be the residents of the New Jerusalem? (Revelation 21:3). Who are the nations who will walk in the light of the golden city? (21:24-26). And what did John mean when he spoke of the leaves of the tree of life that are for the healing of the nations? (22:2)***

Question one: Who will be the residents of the New Jerusalem? Perhaps we should put this question in context. John has a vision of a new heaven and a new earth. The present cosmos has passed away (Rev. 21:1-4). Even the sea, seen at times as the source of evil powers, is no more. There will be no evil on the new earth.

John next sees the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband (21:2). Earthly Jerusalem killed the prophets (Mt. 23:37); it is in bondage with her children (Gal. 4:24); it is likened to Sodom and Gomorrah (Rev. 11:8); it lay in ruins when John wrote--something foreseen by Jesus (Mk. 13:2). The Jerusalem of the saints is "above" (Gal. 4:26). Our citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20). It's a city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God (Heb. 11:10).

When Jesus returns at the end of this present age "the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed" (some versions have "burned up") (2 Pet. 3:10). When the present cosmos has served its purpose, God will create a new heaven and a new earth. At the centre of this new creation the eternal city of God arises. The New Testament knows nothing about the re-construction of earthly Jerusalem; it has had its day. But Jerusalem was such an important concept in the history of salvation, that it shouldn't surprise us that John should describe our heavenly abode in terms of a new Jerusalem.

What makes this new city so attractive is the presence of God. "See, the home of God is among mortals; he will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes" (21:3,4).

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Although John uses vocabulary here that reminds us of God's covenant with Israel, he has all the children of God in mind. The word "people" is in the plural, i.e., all those who have put their trust in Christ. Ethnic, linguistic and social boundaries are all gone when we enter upon our heavenly dwelling place. There should then be no question in our minds as to who the residents of the new Jerusalem are: they are the people of God, past, present and future.

Question two: Who are the nations that walk in the light of this city? In some older versions we read that the "Gentiles" walk in its light (21:24), but "nations" is a better translation of the Greek *ethnos* in this context. The word "Gentiles" is often used in contrast to "Jews" in the New Testament, but that is not the case in our passage. In fact all ethnic barriers will be gone when the nations enter the city of God.

In Revelation 7:9 John reports that he saw "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb." And that is also the multitude that we see here walking by the light of the golden city. But, we have a reference right in the text (Rev. 21:27) that explains who these nations are: "But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life." Those written in the Lamb's book of life are Christ's followers.

When it is added, that the "kings of this earth will bring their glory into it," we should understand that to be figurative language, for here on earth it is customary that kings bring presents when they visit co-regents. John has to use earthly figures of speech to speak of super-earthly realities. The kings of this earth are often seen as the enemies of God in the Revelation (6:15; 17:2; 18:3), but these kings are no longer God's enemies. They bring their glory into the new Jerusalem (21:22).

Question Three: What does John mean when he says that the leaves of tree of life are for the healing of the nations (22:2)? Clearly the apostle has people in mind who are qualified to enter the holy city of God. They are God's own people, whose names are recorded in the book of life (21:27).



John describes the future home of the saints in terms of a restored paradise. The river of life flows through this heavenly city (as it did in the first paradise). On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit. It was from the tree of life that Adam and Eve were shut out. All those who enter this regained paradise will be healed. There will be no more sickness, no more pain, and no more death. Old things have passed away; everything has become new.

***76. At the end of Revelation the apostle warns his readers not to add or to subtract from the prophetic book (Revelation 22:18,19). How are we to understand this warning?***

The solemn warning reads as follows: "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if any one adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book" (Rev. 22:18,19).

Biblical scholars have not always seen eye to eye with respect to the implications of this warning. In a certain sense one could say, that whenever someone interprets this book, he or she is adding to what John wrote. That is obviously not the meaning of this warning, or else no one would dare to expound the Revelation. Preachers would avoid preaching from passages in the Revelation, if they felt that they were under threat of divine judgment if they added something to this book.

Similarly, if we applied this warning to translators of the book, we would all have to learn Greek in order to read it. Every translation calls for addition or subtraction of the words of the original Greek text. Good translations are those in which the translator seeks to give what appears to be the meaning of the text in his or her own words. Literal translations are quite impossible, because every language has its own peculiar structure and it is impossible to render the Greek text into another language with wooden literalism. Should a translator have a temptation to change the original text because he felt uncomfortable with it and felt he needed to improve it by adding or deleting something, then this warning of the apostle could find application. However, translators rarely fall into this trap, because they would immediately be criticized by their peers.

Some have applied John's warning not to the interpretation or elaboration of the text, neither to the translation of the original Greek text into another language, but, taking another step back,

they argue that John had those in mind who would be making copies of his original manuscript. That copyists made numerous mistakes inadvertently when they transcribed the biblical books is obvious. We have a great number of manuscripts available (i.e., copies of the original autographs), and they show great diversity in many details. Some copyists also made deliberate changes in the text, sometimes to improve the language of the biblical writer, sometimes out of dogmatic interests. Such errors can be detected more readily than the accidental variants that slip in when copies are made by hand. It is, however, doubtful that John had future copyists in mind.

A question that cannot be answered with certainty is, whether John had only the tampering with the book of Revelation in mind or whether his warning should be applied to the treatment of all the books of the Bible. The wording of the warning, "the words of the prophecy of this book," does seem to limit the warning to the book of Revelation. It would, however, not be altogether improper if this warning were applied to the rest of Scripture.

The curse formula found in our text is reminiscent of Deuteronomy 4:2, where God commands Moses: "You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord you God with which I am charging you." Perhaps this Old Testament passage gives us a cue as to how John's warning should be understood. It has nothing to do with interpretation, translation or transcription. It has to do with obedience.

Very likely that is also the meaning of Revelation 22:18,19. God's word is to be accepted and obeyed; believers are to order their lives according to its teachings; they are to live by the authority of God's inspired word. For those who reject God's word, who "subtract" from it, by not paying any attention to it, or who have their own ideas about how they should live, and thereby "add" to the word of God, John holds out no bright future. Such unbelievers are subject to God's wrath, which is portrayed in a great variety of ways in this book.

Interestingly, when the Jews translated the Hebrew books

into Greek (the Septuagint), they also pronounced a curse on all who might be tempted to tamper with this translation. This is stated in the letter of Aristeas.

The apostle John wants his readers to take seriously what he has written, for his book is not simply the product of his mind; he witnesses to what God has shown him. He began his book with a beatitude: "Blessed is he who reads aloud words of prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it" (1:3). The "keeping" is the important thing.

**77. *The apostles frequently speak of the imminent return of Christ. In the last chapter of the Revelation (22:7-20) the promise of Christ's imminent return is given twice. What do we say to such promises after almost 2000 years of waiting?***

It is quite true that the apostles underscore the brevity of time prior to Christ's return. "The night is gone, the day is near," writes Paul to the Romans (13:12). The apostle Peter says something similar: "the end of all things is near" (I Pet. 4:7). And James chimes in, "Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near" (5:8). The writer to the Hebrews also stresses the imminence of the end of this age: "Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (10:25). And in his first epistle, John writes: "Children it is the last hour" (I Jo. 2:18). The book of Revelation begins with a note on the closeness of the end, and also ends on that note. "The time is near" (1:3), says John, and what he writes "must soon take place" (1:1). In the last chapter Christ, speaking through John, promises, "See, I am coming soon" (22:7); "Surely I am coming soon" (22:20).

All these statements were made in the first century. It can, therefore, be somewhat unsettling for Bible readers living in the 21st century to understand such predictions, and some may even have secret doubts about the trustworthiness of the apostles who thought the end was near. It should, however, be noticed, that the apostles nowhere suggest the time of Christ's coming. Jesus had taught his disciples explicitly that only God knew when the last hour would come and that they, therefore, must always be on the alert, for Christ would come unannounced, like a thief in the night.

Rather than accuse the writers of Scripture of error, we should rather admit to the limitations of our understanding and seek, if at all possible, to gain a better understanding of what they meant when they spoke of the imminent return of Christ. Let us make an attempt to understand how the apostles use words such as "soon," "near," and "short."

Some Bible readers have taken such words to mean, that

when God's hour strikes, then everything will happen soon, quickly. Some have even tried to read these words in the sense of "surely." But it is best to understand these words in their usual and natural sense.

There seems to be a different sense of time in the New Testament. In the light of eternity time shrivels up, it is shortened, the perspective is different. A thousand years are said to be like a day, and a day like a thousands years. The church in the first century felt as if it were living on the borderline between this world and the next. By faith it already saw the dawn of an eternal day. And that has been the spiritual stance of the church throughout the ages and must be our attitude today. To be sure 2000 years have come and gone since the coming of Christ was predicted as imminent, but if a thousand years are like a day, our understanding of time cannot be determined simply by our human calendars.

The church always lives in "end-times." End-times began with Pentecost and they will come to an end with our Lord's parousia. And in this long interim we must always be ready for Christ's coming. Some Bible readers constantly look for signs by which they think they can establish how close we are to the end of this age, but so far they have always been wrong. The signs of the times, as Jesus and the apostles speak of them, are given to us, not to determine the time of Christ's coming, but they are there all the time, to encourage and to warn us.

Some years ago when I was in Russia, I was asked by Baptist ministers, whether I believed that the Lord would come by the year 2000. Rather than give them a yes or a no for an answer, I pointed out to them, that our calendars, useful though they may be, were not God's calendars. They are human inventions and serve us well as long as we live on this earth. But God has his own calendar of events.

Perhaps we should also be reminded, that although we have many passages that speak of the imminent coming of our Lord, there are also numerous texts in which it is made abundantly clear, that there will be an interim between Christ's first and his second coming; there will be a time of waiting. Repeatedly believers are exhorted to be patient. "Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the

coming of the Lord . . . You also must be patient" (Jam. 5:7,8). The end will not come until the mission of the church on earth is complete. The gospel of the kingdom is to be preached in all the world and then the end will come (Mt. 24:14). We don't know how close to the end we are and because we don't know the day or the hour, we must always be ready and thank God for every extra day of grace he gives our lost humanity.







### About the Author

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